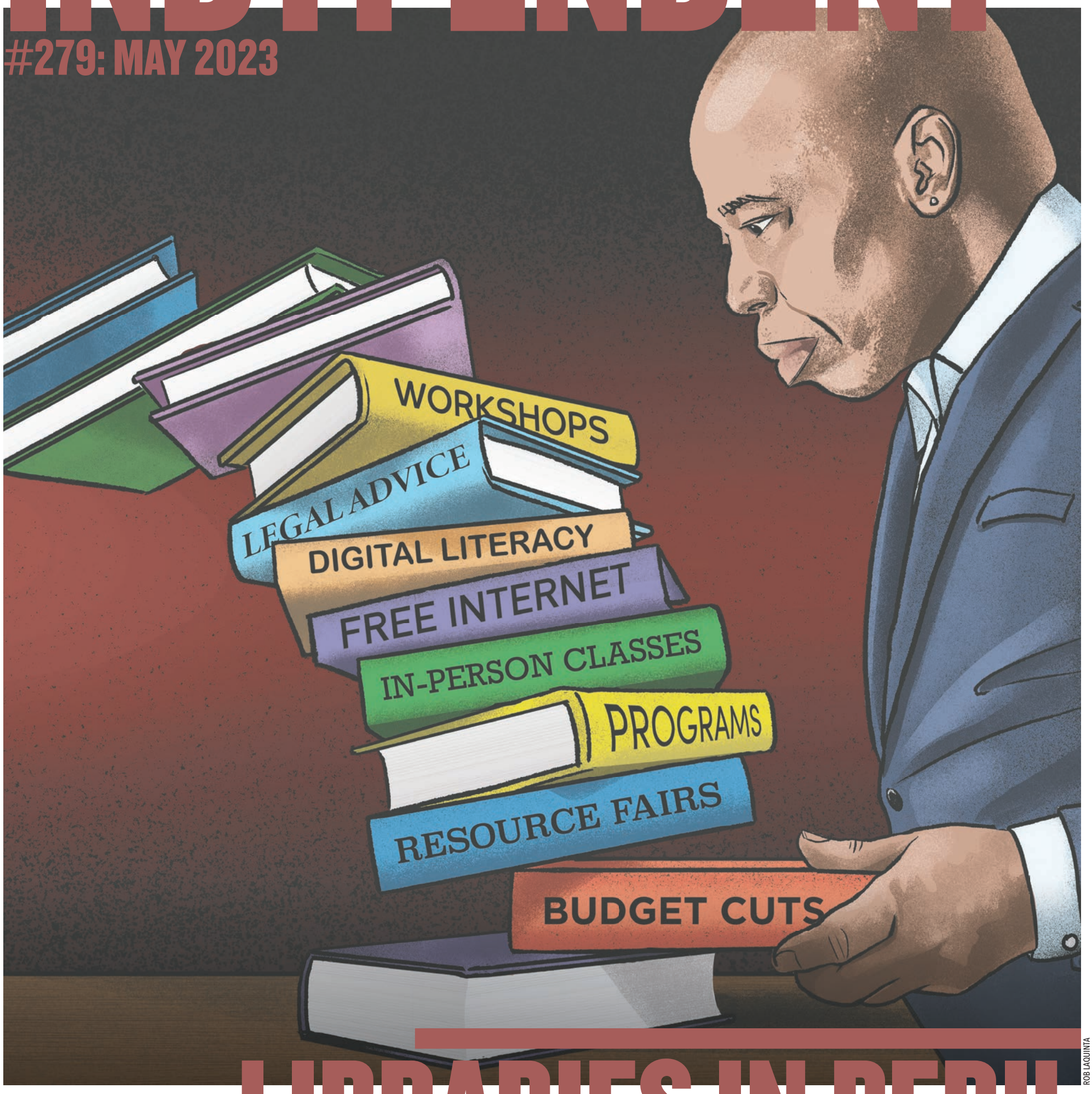
THE INDYPENDENT
#279: MAY 2023

POLICE PAY RAISE SHOCKER — P8



ROB LAQUINTA

LIBRARIES IN PERIL

SATURDAY SERVICE AND MUCH MORE AT STAKE AS MAYOR WIELDS BUDGET-CUTTING AXE

BY KATIE PRUDEN — P10

THE INDYPENDENT

THE INDYPENDENT, INC.
388 Atlantic Avenue,
2nd Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11217
917-426-4856
www.indypendent.org
Twitter: @TheIndypendent
Instagram: theindypendent

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Ellen Davidson, Anna Gold, Alina Mogilyanskaya, Ann Schneider, John Tarleton

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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ASSOCIATE EDITOR
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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Ellen Davidson, Alina Mogilyanskaya, Nicholas Powers, Steven Wishnia

ILLUSTRATION DIRECTOR
Frank Reynoso

DESIGN DIRECTOR
Mikael "Alex <3" Tarkela

INTERN
Blake McMillan, Katie Pruden

GENERAL INQUIRIES:
contact@indypendent.org

SUBMISSIONS & NEWS TIPS:
submissions@indypendent.org

ADVERTISING & PROMOTION:
ads@indypendent.org

VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTORS
Linda Martín Alcoff, Dashiell Allen, Eleanor J. Bader, Bennett Baumer, Nina Berman, Laura Jane Brett, Sue Brisk, Peter Carellini, Olga Federova, Renée Feltz, Todd Fine, Lynne Foster, Jenna Gaudino, Esteban Guerra, Theodore Hamm, Nancy Hoch, David Hollenbach, Manvi Jalan, Marty Kirchner, Yi Liu, Derek Ludovici, Ben Mankoff, Ash Marinaccio, Gary Martin, Reverend Billy, Dylan Rice, Safiyah Riddle, Julia Thomas, and Tyrone Wallace.

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CALENDAR

COURTESY OF A24

MAY

SAT MAY 6–WED MAY 31
STREET VENDOR PROJECT SCAVENGER HUNT
Registered teams will gain access to a mobile app, unlocking challenges that require them to visit vendors across the five boroughs, sample their wares, answer trivia questions and more. Teams will upload photos to the app as they complete as may challenges as they can. When the hunt closes, look for tallied results and awards! Register via bit.ly/svpscavengerhunt.

SAT MAY 6 & SAT MAY 13 • 2PM–5PM • FREE–$12
RESEARCH PRESENTATION – *THE FALLOUT OF WAR: CHRONOLOGIES OF CONFLICT*
In two linked sessions, the Yale Working Group on Globalization and Culture will present their collective research on war and explore its myriad meanings. This is an online-only event offered by The Marxist Education Project. For Zoom link and more info, register via bit.ly/3LoQVyO.

SUNDAYS MAY 9–23 6:30PM–8:30PM • FREE
INTRODUCTORY COURSE: *POLITICAL ECONOMY FOR THE WORKING CLASS*
We will learn the basic concepts of political economy and use them to understand the current economic crisis and some of its symptoms, such as the current debt, inflation and the growing gap between rich and poor. In-person and online. Go to bit.ly/43WYqUN or call (347) 695-1095 for more info.
THE PEOPLE'S FORUM
320 W 37th St., Manhattan

THU MAY 11 • 5:30–7:00PM • SLIDING SCALE
AUTHOR TALK: *ALEX BESLER IN CONVERSATION WITH DEE DEE GOLDPAUGH, KEVON SAMPSON*
In its 38 essays, covering topics of consent, privilege, intersectionality and identity, *Queering Psychedelics* grapples with how modern psychedelic research might address the unique needs and traumas of sexual and gender minorities.
BLUESTOCKINGS COOPERATIVE
116 Suffolk St., Manhattan
(917) 409-0440

MAY 11–14, 18–21 THU & FRI 7PM, SAT 2PM & 7PM, SUN 2 PM • $12–$45
THEATER - *TROY TOO*
Crafted in the heat of the year 2020, from language found on the streets of the protest marches, in the hospitals during the COVID lockdown and from the mouths of endangered fish in the sea, *Troy Too* is a contemporary dialogue with Euripides; The Trojan Women, the apocryphal play of mourning, outrage and the dignity of lamentation. Tickets at here.org.
HERE ARTS CENTER
145 6th Ave., Manhattan
(212) 647-0202

MAY 12–JUNE 8 • VARIOUS SHOWTIMES • $15
FILM SERIES - *THE CITY: REAL AND IMAGINED*
A series of over 60 feature films including *Sweet Smell of Success, The Naked City, Rear Window, The Taking of Pelham 123, The Landlord, Klute, Taxi Driver, Do the Right Thing, A New Leaf, Shaft, The Panic in Needle Park, The French Connection*. Presented in association with the Museum of the City of New York's centennial exhibition This Is New York: 100 Years of the City in Art and Pop Culture. bit.ly/41Qy4ly for details.
FILM FORUM
209 West Houston St., Manhattan
(212) 727-8110

TUE MAY 13
SAVE THE DATE - NAKBA DAY
Within Our Lifetime will commemorate the 75th anniversary of al-Nakba ("The Catastrophe"), the expulsion of 750,000 Arab Palestinians from their homes that accompanied the birth of the Zionist state of Israel in 1948. Information about the precise location, time and theme are TBA. Start making your signs, banners, flags and prepare to come to Brooklyn for Nakba 75. Follow @wolpalestine on Instagram to stay updated.
Bay Ridge, Brooklyn

WEEKENDS THRU MAY 14 • TUE–THU 8AM–8:30PM; FRI–SUN 8AM–6PM • FREE–$18
BOTANIC GARDEN - WEEKENDS IN BLOOM
Celebrate cherry blossom season and all the spring blooms with casual, pop-up music and dance performances, cultural programs, activities for kids and families, garden tours and more. If cost is a barrier, please reserve a free ticket by selecting "community tickets" when buying online. You can also get free passes through Culture Pass with your BPL or NYPL library card.
BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN
990 Washington Ave, Brooklyn
(718) 623-7200

FRI MAY 26–SUN MAY 28 • 1PM–MIDNIGHT
LOWER EAST SIDE FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS
The 28th annual Lower East Side Festival of the Arts throughout the Memorial Day weekend. Look for music, art, theater and more. For tickets, go to theaterforthenewcity.net or call the number below.
THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY
155 1st Ave., Manhattan
(212) 254-1109

SUN MAY 29 • 11AM–5PM • FREE/$3 PER CAROUSEL RIDE
MEMORIAL DAY SCHOOL HOLIDAY IN PROSPECT PARK
A family-friendly nature education program at Prospect Park Audubon Center and the Prospect Park Carousel. Discovery Packs, 12–3 p.m. Explore nature on your own with backpacks filled with nature activities and exploration tools. Animal Encounter, 1–2 p.m. Join Alliance Naturalists in learning more about the animals in the Audubon Center's collection. Family Bird Walk, 2–3 p.m.: Binoculars and bird guides provided. Hosted by the Prospect Park Alliance: (718) 965-8951.
PROSPECT PARK AUDUBON CENTER
Brooklyn

ONGOING • FREE
USE YOUR EBT AT GROWNYC FARMERS MARKETS
Now that it's spring, farm stands at the many local farmers markets around the city will have new produce to offer! You can use your food stamps at the market. Find the market information tent (each GROWNYC market has one) and ask for help getting market tokens with your SNAP card. Find a nearby market at grownyc.org/greenmarket/ourmarkets or call (212) 788-7900.

ONGOING • FREE
HOST A BRAVE NEW FILMS SCREENING
BNF produces feature-length documentaries and investigative videos that seek to educate, influence and empower viewers to take action around issues that matter. Host a free screening of one of their films at your organization, school, faith group, community group, or even in your living room with friends.Go to bravenewfilms.org/screenings1 to see the selection and get started.

SCAVENGER HUNT SPOTLIGHT:
Sabina has been selling produce in Queens since she came to New York 15 years ago.

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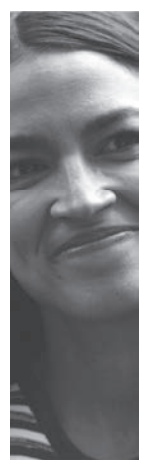

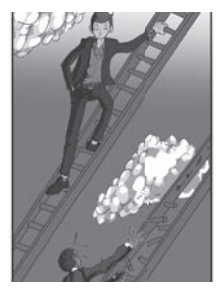

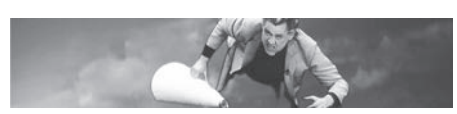

Amy Goodman Juan González Nermeen Shaikh

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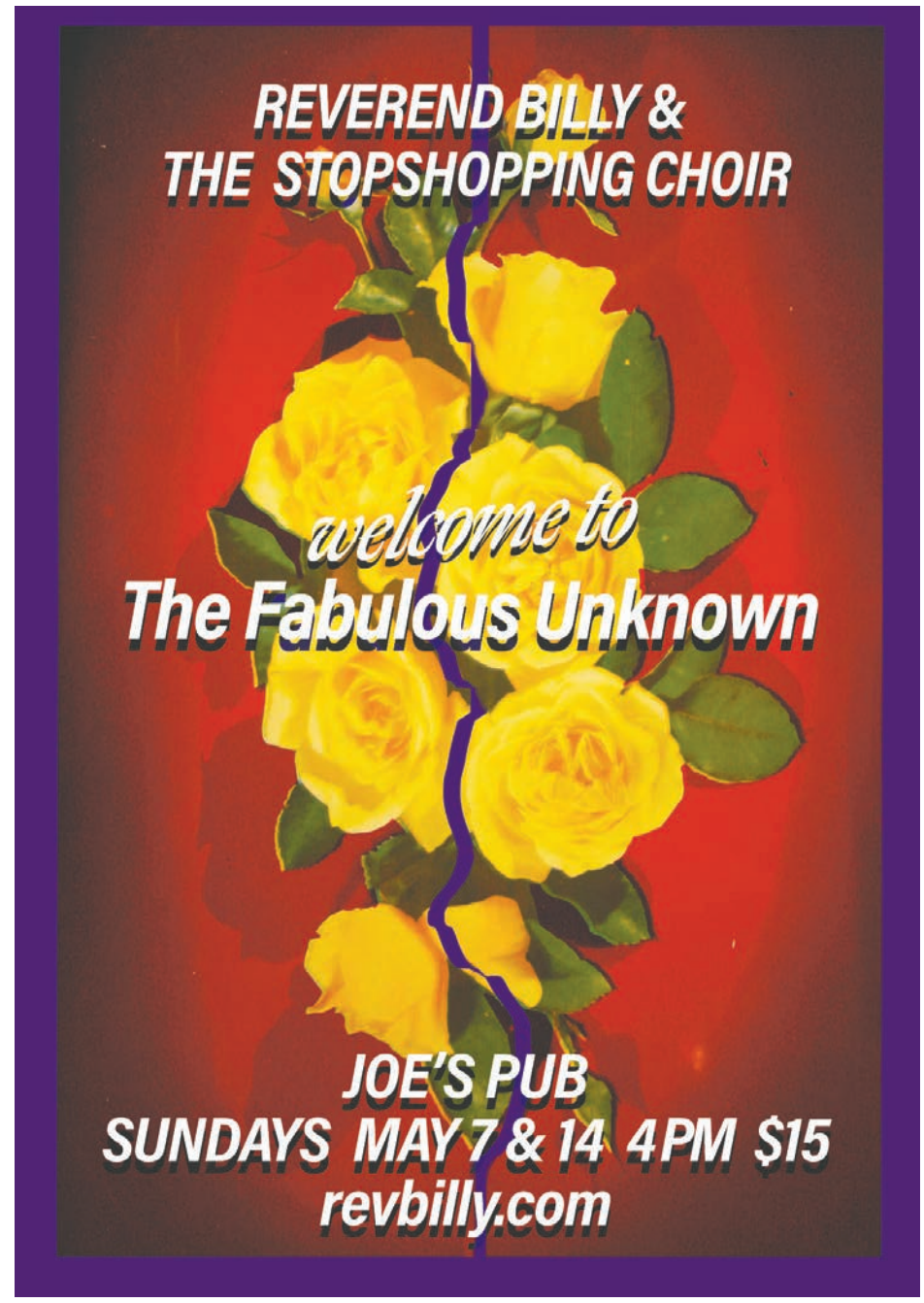

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OR GIVE VIA VENMO!

FAMILIES FOR FREEDOM

SPECIAL BLACK HISTORY MONTH CALENDAR, P12
THE INDYPENDENT
#232: FEBRUARY 2018 • INDYPENDENT.ORG
TENANTS UNITE! P8
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REMEMBERING URSULA LE GUIN P22
LIFE AFTER DEPORTATION
THEIR FATHER WAS RETURNED TO HAITI. NOW WHAT?
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THE VITO MARCANTONIO FORUM PRESENTS
OLIVER STONE'S UNTOLD HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES
SAT 2/10 2-4:30PM

"WE WON!"

IMMIGRANT-RIGHTS COMMUNITY CELEBRATES END OF 30-YEAR SAGA FOR JEAN MONTREVIL

FREE AT LAST: *Jean Montrevil celebrates with his family after Judge Kyle Dandelet issued his ruling. His family's story was featured on the cover of the February 2018 Indypendent.*

By Renée Feltz

"I'm sorry we couldn't accommodate everyone," Immigration Judge Kyle Dandelet told those who packed a small courtroom in Manhattan's Federal Building on April 18 to see Jean Montrevil get what they hoped would be his first "fair hearing" in a three-decade-long saga.

A mix of about 30 family members and longtime supporters from Judson Memorial Church and groups like Families for Freedom crowded the seats behind the tables where Montrevil's lawyers and prosecutors from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) sat. More filled a nearby waiting room, and others watched the court's livestream system. They were there to witness whether Judge Dandelet, a former immigrant-rights attorney appointed to the bench in 2022, would grant the request by the longtime activist and father of four to waive his deportation.

ICE had aggressively worked to prevent Montrevil from getting to this point. But he and his family never gave up and fought strategically with a community of advocates equally determined for him to get a fair shot. Even after Trump deported Montrevil to Haiti in 2018 as part of a crackdown on immigrant activists, his legal team incredibly won his right to return in 2021 after Democatic Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam pardoned him for two 1990 drug convictions ICE had used as a pretext to target him for deportation.

"As you can see, there are a lot of files," the judge said as he began to review the evidence, patting a towering stack of rubber-banded blue legal folders bursting with papers.

The hearing began with questions for Montrevil about his arrival in the United States from Haiti.

"I was 17 years old," he recalled. He is now 54.

Toward the end of the friendly questions from his lawyers, Montrevil explained how he had been working to support his children again since his return from Haiti and was worried about not being able to obtain his medication if he was sent back. "It is very well documented that Haiti is not livable," he noted.

Next up, ICE prosecutors zeroed in on Montrevil's criminal history, even his traffic tickets. They lingered on his convictions in Virginia and asked if he'd been hired by drug dealers to transport cocaine.

"Yes, ma'am, that is the charge that I received a pardon for," he explained.

"I'm truly sorry I did it and I will never ever get involved again in that type of activity," he later added.

The hearing could have ended here, but a final witness offered living proof of Montrevil's dedication to his family: his 19-year-old son, Josiah, who nearly dropped out of high school when his father was deported and is now a college student whose father helps pay his tuition and phone bill.

"He pushed me to try to be the best," Josiah testified.

When Montrevil was deported in 2018, Josiah said it was hard to understand.

"That one incident he had all those years ago at my age couldn't be overlooked. … It was upsetting," he said. "It just made me upset and ashamed that people were still stuck in their old ways and could not look at the full scale of what was going on and could only see him for the criminal conviction he had.

"It would truly mean the world to me that my father would see me and my little sister graduate and that my little sister will be able to grow up with her dad being there for some of the most important years of her life, unlike I did," Josiah concluded.

More witnesses were ready to speak after Josiah. But as everyone reached for a tissue to dab their eyes and blow their nose, Montrevil's lawyers made their move and asked the judge to "grant discretion to our remarkable client." Within 10 minutes, the judge returned with his decision.

"I am granting your application," he announced, and the courtroom erupted in celebration.

"We won!" several people cheered.

"I want to say a few things," said the judge as he calmed people down and they grabbed more tissues.

"You testified that after you'd been deported to Haiti and you found out your criminal conviction had been vacated that you said, 'Finally someone sees the good in me,'" the judge recalled. "I want you to know I see the good in you too."

He went on to describe how he had read every letter of support filed in the case, and noted, "I understand from reading your letters many of you feel an injustice was done. I didn't rectify it, all of you did."

AMBA GUERGUERIAN

COMMUNAL HUB: *Traditional Mexican dancers perform at the April 9 Plaza Tonatiuh in Sunset Park.*

WORK WITHIN THE SYSTEM?

PLAZA TONATIAH ORGANIZERS SEEK LEGAL STATUS

By Amba Guerguerian

On Sunday, April 2, tensions escalated in Sunset Park as police kept around 60 vendors from setting up their stalls. It was supposed to be the first Plaza Tonatiuh of the season, but they weren't able to sell their goods — police threatened anyone that tried with costly tickets or arrest.

Plaza Tonatiuh is an unpermitted open-air market held in the park on Sundays from spring to fall. It was founded in 2021 by Mexicanos Unidos (MxU), a socialist community organization. Every week, narrow pathways between rows of vendors in the park were crowded with attendees of all ages. Vendors sold Latin American food, household items, toys, clothes, and more. Cultural dances and music, children's activities and political assemblies were staples of the Plaza.

"Our kids get to meet other kids, get to know what community is, and explore more," said Abundia, who started selling ice coffees at the Plaza last year. "When the police come, we feel powerless."

Plaza Tonatiuh participants returned April 9 to give food away and celebrate Easter with cultural and musical presentations. Claiming unlawful assembly and illegal vending, cops rushed the crowd, putting children and elders sitting in the grass at risk and setting off a wild melee.

"The presence of police, and especially in numbers, is oppressive and often leads to violence, if not 100% of the time," said Sunset Park City Councilmember Alexa Avilés, a democratic socialist.

On April 16, Plaza and MxU members convened again in Sunset Park. A variety of leftist community organizations were present to show solidarity. They made a circle around Puerto Rican *bomba* drummers that have been playing at the park every Sunday in support of Plaza.

Faced with unrelenting police crackdown, MxU and Plaza members have decided to work within the system. During the April 16 rally, vendors circled the park with a petition supporting the Plaza that has received more than 1,150 signatures. It normally takes an individual more than a decade to obtain a vending permit, according to Street Vendor Project.

But, a concessionary agreement could be negotiated between the Parks department and a legal entity in order to permit a vendors market. These agreements only cover a limited number of vendors, though: A market of more than 60 stalls in Corona Plaza, Queens, just received a permit that will cover around 20 vendors. Over 100 vendors are associated with Plaza.

"It's not what we really need, but it's where we're going to start," said Leo, MxU's chair, "because this is what the people want; we want to make this safe and secure."

If MxU procures a permit, Plaza vendors would participate on a rotating schedule.

MxU tells The Indy it will likely create a worker cooperative LLC to be eligible to negotiate with the Parks Department. Support from their local Councilmember will be crucial. But a series of conflicts beginning last summer has left a fraught relationship between MxU/Plaza Tonatiuh members and Councilmember Avilés.

"We want to move past that," says Leo. "We would like to work with her." Currently, the group is leading a campaign urging Avilés to support its efforts.

According to Avilés, Plaza Tonatiuh organizers are responsible for an "altercation with several Parks officers over a long time." For her to act as a liaison, "There has to be accountability and repair. They have to build trust," said Avilés.

Meanwhile, Mexicanos Unidos says it will continue holding events in spaces where a few vendors at a time can sell. It is also in the early stages of planning with Brooklyn Eviction Defense and Sunset Park Tenant Union to strengthen tenant organizing in the area.

TENANTS DEMAND A RENT ROLLBACK!
Don't agonize, organize!
BUILD TENANT POWER
TENANTS DEMAND A RENT
FIGHT BACK AGAINST RENT HIKES
Rise in Evictions in 2023

MET COUNCIL ON HOUSING/TWITTER

RENT IS TOO DAMN HIGH: *Tenants organizers and several City Councilmembers stormed the stage during a May 2 Rent Guidelines Board meeting. They called for rent rollbacks not hikes.*

NYC BRIEFS

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

STATE BUDGET FUNDS RENEWABLE ENERGY; OMITS EVICTION PROTECTIONS

The New York State Assembly approved a $229 billion budget May 2, more than a month after it was due. The deal includes the Build Public Renewables Act, which will enable the state's power authority to build renewable-energy plants and require all public property in the state to run on renewably-generated electricity by 2035. It also contains funding to increase subway service on nights and weekends — but probably not enough to avert a fare increase later this year. It will modify the state's 2019 bail-reform law so judges no longer have to consider the "least restrictive" option to assure defendants show up for trial, a priority for Gov. Kathy Hochul. It will raise the minimum wage to $17 an hour in New York City and $16 in the rest of the state in 2026, much less than the $21.25 labor groups sought. Its biggest omission is housing. It includes neither Hochul's scheme to increase the housing supply by letting the state override local zoning bans on apartment buildings, which suburban legislators opposed, nor a "good-cause eviction" measure that would prohibit landlords from evicting tenants without a legally-defined reason. The Housing Justice for All coalition lambasted the governor for that, saying she "refused to even negotiate on a compromise." City Comptroller Brad Lander called the budget "both late and underwhelming," saying, "it fails to address the core crisis of housing affordability."

CITY RENT BOARD PROPOSES 2–7% INCREASES FOR RENT-STABILIZED TENANTS

As five City Council members joined protesters occupying the stage and chanting "rent rollback!" the city Rent Guidelines Board on May 2 voted 5-4 to recommend letting landlords raise rents by 2–5% for rent-stabilized tenants renewing their leases for one year and by 4–7% for two-year leases. The proposed increases for the city's slightly-less-than 1 million rent-stabilized apartments fall into the same range as last year's 3.25% for one year and 5% for two years — which were the largest since 2013. The board rejected a rent freeze by a 7-2 vote. Its staff reports estimated that landlords might need increases as high as 8% a year to maintain current profits but that almost 40% of tenants spend more than half of their income on rent. "Any increase in rent would mean evictions for New York's families," the Metropolitan Council on Housing said. Mayor Eric Adams said that a 7% increase would be "clearly beyond what renters can afford and what I feel is appropriate this year." Still, the RGB under Adams, who has now appointed six of its nine members, has favored landlords more than it did under Bill de Blasio, when it froze rents three times in eight years. It will set the actual increases for the coming year in late June.

COP CITY UPDATES

After spending a month in Georgia's Dekalb County Jail, New York City activist Priscilla Grim was released on bail on April 6. "I'm enjoying being free, being with my daughter, not having the sounds of slamming metal and relentless lighting invading my dreams," said Grim, a founding editor of *The Occupied Wall Street Journal* who manages various Occupy-themed social media accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Grim was one of 23 protesters arrested in Atlanta March 5 during a weeklong series of protests against Cop City, a massive police training facility that would be built on the outskirts Atlanta where the country's largest urban forest currently stands. The Cop City 23 face up to 35 years in prison on trumped-up domestic terrorism charges. The protesters went to Atlanta to honor Manuel "Tortuguita," Terán, a forest protector who was killed by the Georgia State Police with 56 bullets. While the police insist they shot Tortuguita in self-defense, mounting evidence suggests otherwise. A police autopsy released by Atlanta Community Press Collective on April 19 found no gun powder on Tortuguita's hands; an independent autopsy by the Teráns found the protester's hands were raised when they died.

A sixth Stop Cop City convergence will begin June 24.

LAURA JANE BRETT

UNION LABEL: *Pro-union workers rally outside their Trader Joe's store in Lower Manhattan.*

SO CLOSE...

TRADER JOE'S UNION BID DEFEATED IN 76-76 VOTE

By Dylan Rice

Trader Joe's United is an independent union that has won elections at stores in several states. On April 20, its attempt to gain a foothold in New York City failed by the narrowest of margins. Workers at the Essex Crossing Trader Joe's store in the Lower East Side voted 76-76 in a union election. The unionists lost the vote, not having the majority required by law.

Around 65% of the estimated 200 Essex Crossing employees signed on to the official petition to hold a union election in March. Since the campaign went public, union-busting was "mostly done through one-on-ones and huddles; I think Trader Joe's incorporates it into its branding," reflected worker-organizer Jordan Pollack after the election. "So it seems friendly, like it's your manager who's always cared about you and your life, and they're telling you that this union is going to destroy you."

The election followed more than two years election followed more than two years of on-the-ground, worker-led labor organizing at the store. Worker-organizers sought to unionize with Trader Joe's United. The independent union first organized last year by the victorious staff of a store in Hadley, Massachusetts, is aiming to follow the success of other independent unions such as Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) and the Amazon Labor Union (ALU).

Trader Joe's Essex Crossing, located at 400 Grand St. near the Williamsburg Bridge, was opened in 2018 and is the largest Trader Joe's on the East Coast.

The initial spur to organize was in response to what Gabe Medrano and other crew members described as an erosion of Trader Joe's values and the company's abandonment of the "inverted pyramid," an alternative to traditional corporate hierarchies. Medrano, employee of six years, said that these changes became apparent during the early period of the pandemic.

Managers at the store were seen as prioritizing the "customer experience" over staff safety when it came to the use of PPE and regarding signage in response to CDC guidelines for maintaining distance, say workers.

"Trader Joe's eventually started giving hazard pay once an online petition started circulating and following discussions on forums involving unionization," said Medrano. These concessions were not enough for many crewmembers.

TJU's website showcases the union's motto: "a union is the ultimate inverted pyramid." Scheduling concerns, a non-living wage, insurance issues and favoritism were some of the issues that union organizers have named as the driving force behind their efforts.

Briget, another member of the organizing committee, says organizers engaged in other efforts prior to the union drive — petitions, conversations with coworkers — "but everything just felt like it was leading to a union. It felt like…a lot of the issues were just a lot bigger than we can take on [without a union]."

The increase in independent unions — those separate from America's larger unions such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters or those affiliated under the AFL-CIO — showcases a shift in the traditional organizing mental-

Continued on page 17

SUE BRISK

NEXT MOVE: *Retired city workers are urging City Council to take action before they are transferred into privately run Medicare Advantage on September 1.*

LABOR BRIEFS

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

MUNICIPAL RETIREES KEEP FIGHTING MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLAN

Mayor Eric Adams announced March 30 that the City had signed a contract with Aetna insurance company to provide a private Medicare Advantage plan for the about 250,000 retired city workers. The deal, backed by District Council 37 and the city teachers' and sanitation workers' unions, will cut off traditional Medicare for retirees by Sept. 1 unless they pay for the coverage themselves. About 1,000 people protested against it outside City Hall April 11. "We know that in this country, health care is broken," Neal Frumkin of the DC 37 Retirees Association told the rally. "Unfortunately, our union leaders didn't take on Big Pharma; they didn't take on the medical establishment; they didn't take on the hospital establishment — they went after us." Medicare Advantage plans are more likely to deny care than traditional Medicare, and they often increase their reimbursements by "upcoding" patients' records to make them seem more sick than they actually are.

BILL TO STOP THEFT OF HOME HEALTH AIDES' PAY STALLS

A bill to end the system of paying home health-care aides who work 24-hour shifts for only 13 hours has stalled in the City Council, with Speaker Adrienne Adams opposed and eight cosponsors withdrawing. "It's like we work the night as a gift to them," aide Trinidad Castro told Work-Bites after a rally April 12. The system is based on the legal fiction that the aides actually have 11 hours off and don't have to take care of the patient during the night. However, home-care agencies and Local 1199SEIU, the main union representing aides, have criticized the bill, sponsored by Councilmember Christopher Marte (D-Manhattan), saying that it would be impossible to pay for the full 24 hours without state funding. "Each day the bill is not put to a vote, more wages will be stolen from women, and more importantly, their health will be harmed," the Ain't I A Woman Campaign said April 27.

UPS NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN AS AUGUST STRIKE LOOMS

Contract talks between UPS and the Teamsters Union began April 17, with the union saying the 340,000 workers it represents are prepared to strike if a deal isn't reached before the current pact expires July 31. The Teamsters want the elimination of a two-tier system where weekend drivers are paid roughly 25% less; hiring more full-time workers instead of having temporary workers deliver packages in their own cars; higher pay for part-time workers; less overtime and surveillance; and protections against extreme heat. "On August 1, if we don't have the contract you deserve, there will be no UPS Teamsters working," General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman told a rally in Boston April 2. General President Sean O'Brien says the union has a $300 million strike fund. UPS made more than $13 billion in profits in 2022, with revenues surpassing $100 billion for the first time.

BEN & JERRY'S SCOOPERS MOVE TO UNIONIZE; STARBUCKS ACCUSED OF STALLING

Workers at the Ben and Jerry's ice-cream company's flagship store in Burlington, Vermont, filed a petition for a union election with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) April 17. Their union, Scoopers United, is asking the company to recognize it voluntarily. "Though the pro-union and pro-social liberties comments have been appreciated, they do not replace a conversation with your Scoopers," it said in a message to management April 19. Scoopers United is backed by Workers United, the SEIU affiliate that also supports Starbucks Workers United. While workers at roughly 300 Starbucks outlets have voted to join the union, none have won a first contract yet. On April 15, the NLRB filed a complaint accusing Starbucks of refusing to bargain in good faith at 144 stores. It charged that the company that "bargained with no intention of reaching agreement" and was "insisting upon proposals that are predictably unacceptable."

ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

HOWEVER BRIEFLY, COVID CURED US OF CAPITALISM

By Nicholas Powers

Just in April, 1,327 people died of COVID-19 in a week. Or 189 per day. Or eight per hour. Think of it. By the time you sit on the subway with a coffee and check your phone, somewhere, eight people struggle to breathe. Until they can't. Eyes dim. Faces go hard and gray. The heart monitor blares in the room. And we just left the train.

The COVID virus is very much alive, leaping from cough to cough, infecting people. The "story" of COVID is dead. It is not in the headlines. It is not on our faces in the form of masks, or in our wallets as a vaccine card. We are not scared of being infected or spreading it to others. We have "gone back to normal."

The danger of "going back to normal" is that we sacrificed the poor, the old and the sick. We also sacrificed the lessons learned from the quarantine. Another world is possible. We experienced a brief collapse of neoliberal politics. Capitalist hyper-individualism was replaced by the social good. Free-market fundamentalism was replaced with a brief universal basic income. The worship of wealth was replaced by the dignity of front-line workers.

During the quarantine, we took back time. Instead of the 9-to-5 rat race, many of us experienced open-ended afternoons, art and long conversations. When George Floyd was murdered, we took back the streets. And when the election came, we took back our democracy.

The treasures of life, revealed suddenly, were quickly shut closed again by the very Democrats we elected. The Build Back Better Plan proposed by President Biden would have deepened social welfare. It was tanked. Then the President urged us to "return to normal." Now, the right wing tries to finish the job, demanding spending cuts in exchange for raising the debt ceiling. In order to fight the push of the right, we have to remember the COVID era for what it was, proof that another world is possible.

MASKS ON

"Am I going to get Covid? Am I going to die?"

The question rang in our skulls, as we panic-shopped for masks in the early pandemic months. At first, wearing a mask was about saving ourselves. When you scored one, it was like winning the lottery.

When packets of masks appeared on bodega counters, fear subsided and the reason turned from self-preservation to saving other people. That's it. That's why we did it. And in doing that one act, we upended a generation of hyper-individualism.

Very few New Yorkers I know liked wearing them. No one wanted hot breath blowing up in their eyes. Or plucking them out of back pockets, dirty and covered with lint. Or the pinch of the strap.

The masks became a symbol of communal sacrifice for the greater good. In doing that one act, we flattened the curve. We saved the lives of people we'd never meet.

Maybe, it was inevitable that New Yorkers donned the mask. We live street socialism; packed on top of each other, we sacrifice our desires to keep the city moving. On the subway, we generally give seats to the old or pregnant, kids or the sick; we give to performers. When COVID hit, we wore the mask for the same reason. Care.

New Yorkers are not nice, but we're kind. The real legacy of 9/11 is when faced with danger, we look out for each other.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

"What are you doing with your stimulus check?" I asked my friend.

"Buying a tiger and a lot of meth," she said.

We laughed and got back to talking about bills, rent and how grateful we were that student-loan payments were suspended.

On Zoom, on phone calls, on text messages — the neighborhood was abuzz that the federal government's stimulus checks had hit. It shattered an ideological consensus that had been in place since President Reagan said in his 1981 inaugural, "Government is not the solution. Government is the problem." Free-market fundamentalism sold us a story that only by privatizing life down to the last atom could the magic of the markets make wealth trickle down to the people.

Shredding welfare was the go-to tactic. Reagan used racist dog whistles like the Black "welfare queen," an updated urban Sambo basically, to incite white racial grievance. Attacking government became the default mode. Even Democratic presidents like Bill Clinton cut welfare and funded more cops.

The neoliberal agenda of shrinking government wasn't really challenged until President Obama's Affordable Care Act notched a minor reform victory for the uninsured. Occupy Wall Street and the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign further discredited it. But it wasn't until COVID hit and those stimulus checks were sent that many of us felt for the first time the immense power of the federal government to make life easier.

The stimulus checks were not radical. The stimulus checks were a conservative tactic to stave off social collapse. Which is why both Democrats and Republicans are united in "returning us to normal" as quickly as possible. Lest we forgot the day when the wealth we made for the wealthy rained back into our lives.

A HERO'S WELCOME

Clapping, loud cheers, the clanging of pots and pans greeted nurses and doctors. Around the world, during the deadliest months of COVID, people celebrated front-line workers. COVID forced us to replace celebrity worship with gratitude to workers for keeping us alive. Stranded in our homes, we saw who kept us going. It was the delivery men, the local bodega family, the nurses and doctors getting us oxygen when COVID squeezed our lungs like dirty rags. Many toiled in obscurity, but during the quarantine, they came home to a hero's welcome.

The media-driven fetish of wealth created a culture of class voyeurism. Think of Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous or The Kardashians — parades of obscene wealth highly publicized to make it seem attainable.

When COVID swept across the earth, it destroyed lives but it also destroyed, briefly, a way of life that in the end was deadlier than the virus. It cured us of capitalism.

Now we are back on the 9-to-5 treadmill. The heroism of workers is in the rear-view mirror. We're speeding up again to the next disaster.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The COVID pandemic turned the world upside-down. We lived for a moment, outside of capitalism, and loved it. But that miracle is so bound up with suffering and millions dead in the United States and millions more internationally. Such terror makes it hard to save what is worth saving.

We need to. If we are to survive Global Heating. We need to recreate free money, free time and solidarity but not because we are faced with an apocalypse. We need to do it because we care for each other.

That's why it's vital to remember those dying from COVID now. They have quickly become the collateral damage of capitalism, an expendable group thrown away so we can "go back to normal." But business as usual is catching up with us. Soon, all of us will be "collateral damage" of droughts, storms and food shortages.

It doesn't have to be that. Another world is possible. We know. We lived in it.

DAVID HOLLENBACH

THE MAYOR'S IRRESPONSIBLE POLICE-UNION CONTRACT DEMANDS CLOSER SCRUTINY

By John Teufel

By now you've probably heard — NYPD officers are a big step closer to becoming members of the same 1% they work for and protect. They aren't quite there yet — the 1% is really rich! But thanks to the new contract agreement Eric Adams struck with the Police Benevolent Association on April 5, members of the force with at least five years on the job could easily see themselves spring into the top 10% of earners nationwide if they are willing to hit the gas on overtime.

Let's crunch some numbers. The new deal, which runs retroactively from 2017 to 2025, sees officers with five and a half years on the job hit a base salary of $131,500, a pay bump of about 50% from current five-year officers. Overtime, which for NYPD officers is any time worked over 40 hours a week, gets paid out at time-and-a-half. Even with the present, much lower salaries, Legal Aid's Law Enforcement Lookup tool reveals that thousands of cops have managed to top $50,000 in annual overtime at some point in the last three years, and many have gone way above that, earning $70,000 or $80,000 or more on top of their normal salaries.

Let me now stretch the limits of my abilities and try to do some math to show you how overtime at a higher wage is much more valuable than overtime at a lower wage. If you assume an officer is making $84,000 a year, which is approximately the current five-year officer salary, that works out to around $40 an hour (not counting vacation and sick time). Overtime at that rate is $60 an hour. The new five-year salary, on an hourly basis and again without including vacation and sick time, is $62.50 (incredibly, more than the current overtime rate). That means the new overtime rate for five-year cops will be a whopping $93.75 an hour, a 50% increase. An officer who pulled $50,000 in overtime under the old contract will now make $75,000 in overtime alone for the same number of hours, on top of their newly bloated salary. (It's easy for cops to create unnecessary overtime — officers themselves call it, in a somewhat visually disgusting euphemism, "milking it.")

You have to make $173,176 a year to make it into the top 10% of earners in the United States. This new contract will place a lot of rank-and-file cops deep into that 10 percent.

Cops already enjoy arguably the sweetest perks in the New York City civil-servant firmament. After 22 years of work, they retire with a pension worth 50% of their annual salary, which is calculated to include their overtime pay. (They can retire at 20 years with a slightly smaller pension.) Even under the current contract, retired NYPD officers can go on to become quite well-off by taking up second careers, often in lucrative private security positions, where they are able to formalize their previously informal job of protecting rich people's stuff. In the past, this generous retirement program (which sees some officers retire with full pension at age 43) was in theory meant to make up for lower pay. Now that officers will earn more than most other civil servants in the city, it is simply a gratuity, another example of how the PBA has New Yorkers over the barrel.

And of course, NYPD police enjoy a perk that could be described alternately as sweet or mind-numbingly horrifying — they can commit egregious misconduct in the line of duty, up to and including murder, without facing any consequences.

It is both a cliché and false to say that budgets express our priorities "as a city" — they express the priorities of the small number of people who vote them into law. But boy oh boy, are those people's priorities wacked. Teachers with five years on the job and a master's degree earn $71,290 a year, more than $50,000 less than cops under the new deal. And cops don't have to have a master's, or a bachelor's for that matter. Teachers aren't eligible for overtime. Even if you prorate that pay to factor in summers off — that is, if you increase that teacher's salary by 25% to account for June through August off — they come in more than $30,000 less than cops. And they have to deal with demanding kids all day, whereas cops get to play Candy Crush on their phones with their pals. Also, I don't know of any cops who have to buy their own guns, as teachers often do school supplies.

As an attorney, when I read about the latest Eric Adams-created outrage, my mind automatically goes to a simple question: How is he legally able to do this? In this case, I wondered whether Adams has the sole legal authority to obligate the City to this massive payout, estimated to cost NYC taxpayers $5.5 billion over and above the massive sums we already hand over to the NYPD. Can he just … do that?

The answer is yes and no. I know, I know. Stick with me.

The New York Civil Service Law (known as the "Taylor Law") does exclusively vest the power to negotiate and enter into labor agreements with local chief executives, usually mayors. That is state law — New York City can't do anything about it. When it comes to signing contracts with unions, Eric Adams is the only game in town.

But that doesn't mean the City Council is obligated to fund those contracts. It is one thing to sign a piece of paper and another to come up with the cash obligated thereon.

The City Council does not need to agree to a budget that incorporates this irresponsible, inequitable contract. Certainly it doesn't need to do so without extracting some other serious concessions from the mayor and the NYPD, which off the top of my head could include the $134 million-per-year police battalion that specializes in suppressing protests, reining in overtime spending, taking cops off mental health calls, removing final disciplinary authority from the police commissioner and disbanding the Strategic Response Group.

Such an action wouldn't be unprecedented. In 2004, the Buffalo legislature knocked down a proposed police contract over concerns about healthcare costs. In 2017, Rockland County legislators fought their county executive (the Rockland version of a mayor) over how to pay for a sheriffs union contract. Outside of New York, Denver legislators were brave enough to reject their own police union's contract in 2020.

If ever a contract needed to be smothered in the crib, it is this one. Eric Adams has been slicing and dicing New York City government with aplomb, first targeting the school system and now moving on to demand 4% cuts from the budgets of nearly every city agency. Particularly gruesome, for someone who spent a lot of time in libraries as a kid, are the tens of millions of dollars he is trying to cut from the City's library funding. To reward the NYPD — an agency that has not only actively failed in its mission to reduce crime but has taken a lot of innocent victims down along the way — while punishing every other New Yorker with cuts to vital services, would be to roll over and die.

If that happens, we may as well disband the City Council now and admit that Adams is, as he so often claims, an emissary of God among us, and we live not in a city, but in a police department with some minimal public services attached.

FLICKR

HOW TO MAKE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL WORK FOR WORKING PEOPLE

By Brandon West

We just finished state budget negotiations dominated by Gov. Kathy Hochul's regressive ideas around bail, housing, charter schools and more. And now the city budget, which is due in June, will take center stage as Eric Adams seeks a new round of cuts to almost every city department and agency with the exception of the NYPD, Corrections and Sanitation.

Progressives on the City Council have struggled in recent years to advance a people's budget. This was the case even in 2020 when mass organizing spurred by historic Black Lives Matter protests led to the establishment of an Occupy City Hall encampment while the budget was being debated inside. To understand why success is elusive, we need to better understand how the budget process works and identify areas where progressives can step up their game.

As in Albany, the city budget process is skewed to give more power to the chief executive. By law, it's the mayor who dictates the amount of funds that can be allocated in the budget, never mind that other entities, like the Independent Budgeting Office and the City Comptroller, release competing and generally higher revenue estimates that over the years have proven to be more accurate.

Probably the most substantial weapon in the mayor's arsenal is the fact that the specific areas in each agency body where funding is put, called "units of appropriation," are highly broad and often inaccurate, allowing agencies to use funds as they see fit and eventually move them out of projects and into unintended areas without City Council oversight.

Council Speaker Adrienne Adams (no relation to the mayor) also has an outsized role in the process. She appoints a Budget Negotiating Team (BNT) that meets in the lead-up to the budget process. When I worked as a budget analyst for the City Council, I got a front row seat to the sausage making. But it was often a tame meeting because the BNT is mostly composed of those who've found favor with the speaker rather than being composed of members who accurately represent a cross-section of the five boroughs and its various identity groups. In exchange for a seat in this vaunted body, a member is obligated to forgo their own public advocacy for the budget — no attendance at budget-related rallies or sign-on letters permitted.

Non-BNT members have much less power over negotiations until details come their way. Chairs of committees will learn about the funding their agency is being allocated, but they aren't in the room where the deals are being made, so by the time the word gets to them, it's too late. The speaker tries to closely guard details, so that members can't impact the process. If more people knew, outside groups could organize campaigns focused on leveraging constituents to lobby their leaders on issues and potential cuts to the budget. When it's all under wraps, there is no outside game, and it's an all-inside game with very few in the know.

This undemocratic process played out last year when the mayor and the speaker reached a handshake budget agreement on June 10 that included hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to public education. The speaker quickly brought it to a vote on June 13 (more than two weeks before the deadline for finishing the budget) to prevent opposition from coalescing. Despite 35 of the Council's 51 members belonging to the Progressive Caucus and the City Council being majority-female for the first time in its history, it approved an austerity budget that defunded public schools trying to recover from the pandemic by a vote of 44-6.

Last year's progressive collapse was triggered by fear of the speaker. Council members went against their campaign promises because they were afraid she would cut them off — that she would slow walk other legislation they were sponsoring, that they wouldn't have a "seat at the table" when budget modifications were negotiated later in the year, that Schedule C discretionary funds for local groups in their districts would be curtailed or cut off. Discretionary funding makes up less than 1% of the total city budget but is crucial to council members. Bringing back the bacon to their district gives them tangible accomplishments — funding for a beloved community center, a spruced-up park, a new traffic light installed in a dangerous intersection — that they can brag about to voters. And, it allows them to steer resources to non-profit allies who are often key players in their local political machines.

Last year's six hold-outs — Councilmembers Alexa Avilés, Charles Barron, Tiffany Cabán, Sandy Nurse, Chi Ossé and Kristin Richardson Jordan — threw down a marker. As public opinion turned against the budget cuts, their choices were vindicated while progressives who sided with the mayor struggled to explain their votes. One thing that gives me hope is that in the aftermath of last year's fiasco, the "new look" Progressive Caucus shrunk from 35 to 20 members after adding more stringent membership requirements. Smaller and much more defined, it can build a clearer voice this cycle. Those who left the caucus wanted the "progressive" label when it served their purposes but did not want it to have any substance.

Here are some other things City Council can do to make itself a more effective and co-equal branch of government.

- *Reform the selection process for the BNT so that it better represents the city as a whole.*
- *Utilize the "terms and conditions" process to ensure monies are only spent on appropriate activities. The Council could leverage this process by requiring data from the agencies for accountability and oversight instead of letting the speaker's senior staff manage the flow of information.*
- *Start using provisions in the Council's rules that enable members to advance legislation without the blessing of the speaker. This would lessen fears of retaliation for bucking the speaker during the budget process.*

Working class New Yorkers deserve a budget that meets their needs. A Progressive Caucus that is bolder, more strategic and more unified will bring us closer to seeing that happen.

Brandon West previously worked at the NYC Office of Management and Budget and as a City Council budget analyst. He was an organizer with Occupy City Hall in 2020 and ran as a DSA-endorsed City Council candidate in 2021.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL: *New York City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams and Mayor Eric Adams (no relation) have an outsized influence over city budget negotiations.*

PUNCHING DOWN ON OUR LIBRARIES

BUDGET CUTTING MAYOR TARGETS A BELOVED NYC INSTITUTION

By Katie Pruden

There's a public library in every single neighborhood in the city, across all five boroughs. More than 200 locations altogether. Whether it be Queens (QPL), Brooklyn (BPL) or New York (NYPL), which encompasses The Bronx and Staten Island, the library's employees, resources and physical spaces serve the public beyond providing books, free wifi and nice architecture.

If you fill out a form, librarians at BPL will personally pick out recommendations for you based on what you like. Using the new Queens Name Explorer, you can find out about the history behind the names of local parks, streets and schools.

When thousands of asylum-seeking migrants arrived in the city last June and were denied public services that they had been told they would be provided, the libraries responded to this crisis. In the past, libraries have provided free online and in-person classes, programs and workshops for non-native speakers, as well as services such as ActionNYC, which provides legal help for immigrants. Over the past year, NYPL has also hosted 11 immigration resource fairs and created 5,000 "Welcome Kits" in partnership with New York Immigration Coalition.

Catalina is a Data Program Assistant at the Pacific Library in Downtown Brooklyn. She said she appreciates "meeting new people and seeing how I can help them. Trying to help them find the closest thing that they are looking for and then seeing the outcome is what motivates me to be here."

However, these services could come under tremendous stress in the face of Mayor Eric Adams' proposed 2024 city budget, which cuts millions from education, social services and more.

In his preliminary budget released in January, Adams proposed library cuts totaling $36.2 million. In April, Adams called for city agencies to cut their budgets by another 4%. That left the libraries facing a total of $52.7 in budget cuts. However, in the face of growing public backlash, Adams retracted the second cut in late April, while still leaving intact the initial $36.2 in cuts.

The NYPL, BPL and the QPL already face $1 billion worth of repairs for aging library infrastructure. In a joint statement the three library systems said, "Further cuts would make a bad situation even worse."

Library attendance has returned to pre-pandemic levels, and new card users are signing up at a rapid clip. In Brooklyn, 143,000 new library cards were issued last year, according to BPL President Linda Johnson. The mayor's cuts would affect the essential operating subsidy, which pays for costs such as utilities and staffing. A reduction in staffing could lead to fewer operating hours and weekend closures at some branches.

New York City's libraries are, on average, open fewer hours than many of the nation's largest library systems in the nation, including Chicago, Dallas, San Diego and San Antonio, and most of the large counties in New York State, according to researcher John Surico who wrote a 2021 report, "Branches to Recovery: Tapping the Power of New York's Public Libraries to Ensure an Inclusive Recovery and Rebuild a More Equitable City," for the Center for an Urban Future.

"Right now we should be making the libraries as close as possible to being open as many hours as possible, given that there are so many resources, but they are so hindered by the times that they are open," said Surico, who called on the City to make an annual investment of $1 billion — about 1% of the budget — in its library systems to ensure that New York City branch libraries lead the nation in weekly hours of operation. This would more than double the current library budget.

"Right now we should be making the libraries as close as possible to being open as many hours as possible, given that there are so many resources, but they are so hindered by the times that they are open," said Surico.

In his report, Surico notes how the libraries were able to substitute a variety of services from what the pandemic took away, such as providing for students overcoming a loss of hands-on learning with tutoring or helping unemployed individuals with career services.

"This is not a time to just restore the budget to its normal level; this is really the time to expand the budget and the libraries' role in so many different facets of the city's operations," he said.

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Dash has lived in Brooklyn for 40 years. He often goes to the Pacific Library near the Atlantic Yards subway station in Downtown Brooklyn, because he does not own a computer and sometimes needs help with technology. If the library's operating hours were to be affected, he said that it would "hurt a lot of people, especially the seniors and the students. Where are they going to go? If anything they should expand the hours, not cut them."

City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams has said that she opposes the proposed cuts; however, what will happen is uncertain after she oversaw last year's $469 million in cuts to public schools that could have been covered, according to New York City comptroller's office, with leftover stimulus money.

"I am absolutely dead set against any cuts to our libraries, much less $36 Million," said Councilmember Tiffany Cabán (D-Astoria). "What's especially outrageous is that [it is] pennies to the City. It's less than one third of 1% of the NYPD's $11 Billion budget."

According to the city's Independent Budget Office, city library funding for 2023 was higher than in 2022 — around a $6 million increase for each of the three branches. However, in 2024 and beyond, the funding will decrease substantially, getting to what it was before the pandemic, in 2019 and not adjusting for inflation.

For many years, mayors have proposed cutting funding for libraries — there's at least one in every Councilmember's district — in order to wrest concessions in other areas of the budget. Wary of this game of chicken and the danger it poses, the presidents of the city's three branch library systems in 2015 launched Invest in Libraries, an annual budget-season campaign to rally public support for the libraries when they come under attack.

This year, Invest in Libraries launched a letter writing initiative that sends pre-written testimony to the mayor and City Council members. BPL has almost reached their goal of 20,000 letters. They've spread the word using the hashtag #investinlibraries on Twitter, which hundreds of people have responded to, sharing why the public libraries are important to them.

Urban Librarians Unite, a group of librarians advocating for the existence of city libraries, used the hashtag to tweet, "Censorship can happen all at once, or a little at a time. The results are the same." Though New York may not be affected by the book bans that have been sweeping through Republican-controlled states, threatening an institution that has made banned books available digitally to teens across the country might be seen as another form of censorship.

• • •

SUE BROSK

SO MANY CHOICES: *A patron of the Bloomingdale Branch Library browses one of the library's books.*

Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada is the president of the American Library Association. Founded in 1876, it is the world's oldest and largest library association.

"Often the public doesn't understand the power of their voice," she said. "I think that often a lot of money goes to police and firefighters, because they have strong unions and community support. We can have the same exact things for libraries, we just need the communities to help rally around us and demand that we have the resources that we need."

How we access information has changed exponentially since the NYPL, BPL the QPL were each founded in the 1890s. And the library as a public space has evolved, too.

On a recent Friday, Gloria visited the Pacific Library while waiting to pick up her grandson from school. Born and raised in Brooklyn, she said she's been going to the library since she was five-years-old. "I remember carrying lots of books," she said. "The libraries used to be places where you got books, but now it's a very multipurpose kind of place. I think it's serving the community."

In 2019, the Flushing Library in Queens saw 1.7 million visitors. Imagine if libraries were open every day, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and who they could be helping. But this doesn't seem possible when year after year, the libraries are on defense and will continue to be as Adams administration priorities change.

So what would it take for New York City's libraries to escape endless cycles of looming austerity and retrenchment and to truly flourish? In addition to his recommendation that the library's annual budget be more than doubled to $1 billion per year, John Surico suggests creating a Mayor's Office of Libraries in order for patrons to have a more active position in the decisions that affect them.

For now, library users will have to rely on their elected officials.

"I got a lot of outreach from people across the political and ideological spectrum in terms of how they were very uncomfortable with seeing the cuts," said Chi Ossé (D-Bedford Stuyvesant), chair of the committee that oversees libraries. "I'm hoping, with those feelings that they shared with me, as well as the advocacy campaigns that I'm going to be pushing with my partners in the library systems, we will be pushing against these cuts."

WHAT THE LIBRARY MEANS TO ME

DASH
PACIFIC LIBRARY, DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

What's something that you appreciate about the library?

I do a lot of research, and email, and catching up with people. For me, it's very important because I don't have a computer at home. It's vital for me also for help with technology, because all the cutting and pasting and everything. There is always someone here who can help me.

How would shortened hours of operation or less access to programs affect you?

It hurts a lot of people, especially the seniors and the students. A lot of students come after school. So, where are they going to go? If anything, they should expand the hours and not cut them.

KAELA
SEWARD PARK LIBRARY, CHINATOWN

What's something you appreciate about the public library?

Free resources, not only books, but a facility, a place to go, a community point. The internet, video, all sorts of stuff.

How do you feel about possible shortened hours or full day closures, if this budget is approved?

We hate to hear things like that, that help so many people, being cut when so many other things are not. Or, budgets are increasing for certain things. We want to raise a reader, so as he gets older, it's something we want to use. I think it's crazy that it closes at three on weekdays. It's already not open as much as it should be. Kids coming out of school, where are they going to do homework? I thought that was the place where kids did that.

LINDA JONES
SEWARD PARK LIBRARY, CHINATOWN

What's something that you appreciate about the library?

For me, for an adult, the easiest way for us to use it is to order a book online and come pick it up here. But, I watch the kids and they come out of the library with piles of books. Their parents bring them here regularly and they check out a lot of books. Mostly books in Chinese, but sometimes they have a mix.

Did you see the sign around here that we made? It said something like, 'If you have a library and a garden, you have everything you need.'

With the possibility of shortened hours or full day closures, who do you think will be affected?

If the teenagers don't have their place at the library, where are they going to go? They're gonna be out here, smoking pot, messing things up. Not because they are bad kids, but because they don't have anything else to do. They get into mischief. Think about teenage boys, I used to have one. They are unbelievable, a different species.

CATALINA
BORN AND RAISED IN BROOKLYN. HAS WORKED AT THE PACIFIC LIBRARY FOR ABOUT A YEAR.

I'm a data program assistant. I do a little bit of everything. [The library] is really important because I feel like it is mostly for the community and so there are a lot of resources available. If people don't have access to a computer, no one really asks for much information here. It's more like, 'do you have an ID?' and then you can get a library card, and use all the resources from there.

KATIE PRUDEN

ELINOR KAY

ELINOR KAY

COURTESY

ON THE MOVE: *Former Chicago public school teacher and union organizer Brandon Johnson takes office as the Windy City's new mayor on May 15.*

A TALE OF TWO TEACHERS UNIONS

MILITANT CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION SHOWS HOW TO TRANSFORM A CITY

By Norm Scott

On April 4, former Chicago public school teacher and Chicago Teacher Union (CTU) organizer Brandon Johnson was elected mayor of Chicago. His opponent was Paul Vallas, former CEO of the Chicago school system and an adamant foe of the CTU who staked out tough-on-crime positions that were expected to give him a clear path to victory. The long and tangled history between Vallas and the CTU made this victory especially sweet. Vallas was the favorite of *The Chicago Tribune*, pro-charter school billionaires, the police union, Republicans in general and corporate Democrats, including the Obama wing of the party.

The rise of the leftist Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), founded in 2008 and taking power in the CTU in 2010, galvanized the nation's labor movement with a 2012 strike that embarrassed Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration shortly before the 2012 presidential election. To pull off the strike, the CTU hired organizers, including Brandon Johnson, to spread its message. Street actions, including demonstrations at banks, were part of the strategy. The union's power and influence in Chicago has only grown.

Despite leading two strikes in the last decade since taking power and a major pushback on COVID-19 strategies, the CTU remains popular with parents and segments of the public. While mainstream corporate media has downplayed the significance of the Johnson victory, left-leaning media hailed the win as a blow to the corporate wing of the Democratic Party.

Johnson got 80% of the Black vote, despite opposition from Black elites. No group was more indispensable to his winning campaign than the Chicago Teachers Union. The CTU, which has fought the austerity politics coming out of City Hall for over a decade, provided millions of dollars in donations and mobilized many of its 25,000 members to volunteer for Johnson's campaign. More broadly, the CTU's endorsement signaled that he was the candidate progressive Chicagoans should support.

Another left-leaning social-justice union, The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), recently supported their city's lowest-paid striking education workers by refusing to cross the picket line and closing down the school system for three days, leading to a massive win for those workers. UTLA has also led its own strikes and remains popular with parents and the public.

In contrast to Chicago and Los Angeles's teachers unions, New York City's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has partnered with the Adams administration to move its retirees from Medicare, the only public health-car option, to a privatized Aetna Medicare Advantage plan. An amendment at the union's Delegate Assembly calling for the UFT to lobby to remove New York State's ban on public-sector strikes led union leaders to denounce the move with arguments that ranged from the obscure to the ridiculous. Recent headlines on an opposition blog captured the moment: "Why doesn't UFT leadership want us to have the right to strike?"

Why have teachers unions in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York taken such divergent paths? What is New York City losing by having a neutered teachers union that eschews militant grassroots organizing in favor of insider politicking? What would it look like for New York City to have a teachers union with deep ties to its school communities as well as other social movements and that was ready and willing to throw down against our local billionaires in order to elect a bold progressive to lead the city? After all, the UFT has almost 200,000 members, making it almost 10 times larger than its sister union in Chicago and has more financial and personnel resources at its disposal.

ORIGINS MATTER

Left-wing teacher-union caucuses rose to power in Chicago and Los Angeles in the past 20 years in response to the all-out assault on public schools launched by the corporate-backed education "reform" movement. Meanwhile, the UFT has been stuck in its early 1960s origins at the forefront of the national teacher-unionization movement of that era. Most of its wins came in the 1960s as the result of militant unionism and rank-and-file action, including strikes. Ties to the city's political elites have become fossilized over subsequent decades. When the corporate education-reform movement hit the city with Mayor Bloomberg's takeover of public education in 2002 under a new mayoral control law, the union went along with many of his policies: charter schools, high stakes testing, rating teachers based on the outcomes and closing schools based on standardized test scores.

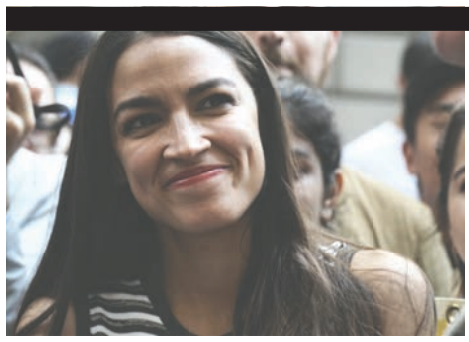
The early days of the UFT were often raucous, with a strong dose of democracy and rank-and-file activism that made some of the founders uneasy. Unity Caucus, a top-down political machine operating under the principles of democratic centralism and loyalty oaths, became their instrument of control once Albert Shanker took power in 1964 and has maintained its dominance.

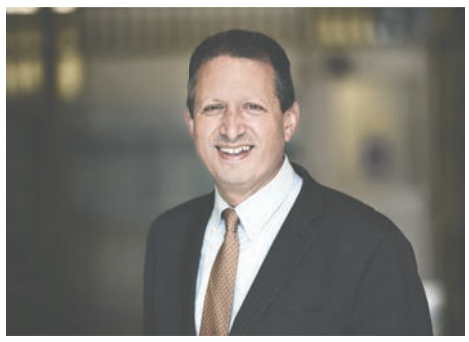
Shanker was a strident anti-communist intent on keeping the left from having any influence within the union. Mechanisms were established to consolidate Shanker's control of the UFT. As the UFT's size grew, it gained sway over New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), the statewide federation of teachers unions, and then the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the national union. In 1968, Shanker became the face of a deeply polarizing series of strikes by the teachers union that were directed against a Black-led experiment in community control of schools. In 1983, he backed a right-wing report, "A Nation at Risk," commissioned by the Reagan administration that was the opening salvo in the war against public education and led to decades of bad education policy. Recently the report has been labeled as "fake news" for using intentionally-flawed data to make public schools look worse than they were. Shanker's support prevented the AFT from taking a stand.

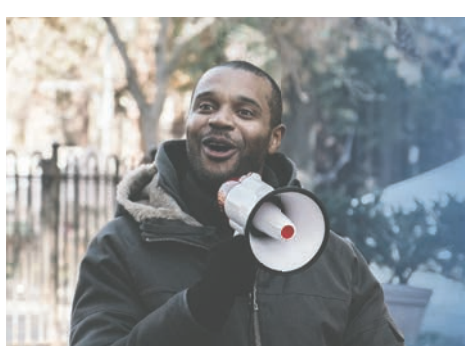
The anti-left roots were sown internally in the UFT, and their DNA animates a continued opposition to progressive, left movements inside the union. Since the late 1960s, opposition caucuses inside the UFT have operated to the left of Unity but have repeatedly been fragmented by their own sectarian politics and an anti-democratic union structure designed to keep Unity Caucus in power permanently. In 2019, four separate left caucuses ran against Unity with predictably disastrous results. In 2022, they all united under a shared banner and made inroads into Unity's dominance, capturing more than one third of the total vote, and 43% of the active teacher vote. If the coalition holds together for the 2025 election, there may well be a serious challenge to Unity for the first time.

It always seems impossible until it's done. But if progressives inside the UFT can topple Unity and remake the union in the image of its more militant siblings in Chicago and Los Angeles, it will be a seismic event in both public education and in city, state and national politics.

Norm Scott is a retired New York City public-school teacher who taught for 35 years and was involved in three UFT strikes. He has participated in many UFT opposition caucuses since 1970 and is the editor of Ed Notes *(ednotesonline.blogspot.com) since 2006. He is currently active with Retiree Advocate, a retiree caucus challenging Unity Caucus for control of the 60,000-member UFT's retiree chapter.*







FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD

WHICH ONE OF THESE POLS MIGHT CHALLENGE ERIC ADAMS IN 2025?

By John Tarleton

Incumbent New York City mayors are hard to beat. They have widespread name recognition and vast patronage powers that reach into every corner of the city. They can hoover up campaign donations from both well-heeled business interests and municipal labor unions that want to stay on Hizzoner's good side. If progressives don't want to spend eight years watching Mayor Adams cater to the cops and the 1% while the rest of our city government withers, they would do well to coalesce around a viable alternative in advance of 2025, when Adams is up for re-election. But first someone has to step up.

Most mayoral aspirants will be inclined to wait until Adams is term-limited in 2029. But there are several good reasons to run sooner instead of later. First, Adams squeaked out a narrow victory in 2021, and his approval numbers continue to languish in the mid-30s. Secondly, Adams has no real accomplishments to point to and is best known to many for his busy nightlife. And third, breaking out of a jam-packed field in 2029 will be at least as challenging for a candidate as jumping the line and going toe-to-toe with the incumbent in 2025.

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will run for president someday. At least that's the conventional wisdom about the bartender-turned-congresswoman whose upset victory in 2018 made her an overnight political sensation. As a mayoral candidate, Ocasio-Cortez's charisma, organizing skills and small dollar fundraising juggernaut would serve her well. She would be New York City's first female mayor, and the prospect of having such a high-profile politician leading us would flatter New Yorkers who love to see their city take center stage. It would also be an opportunity for AOC to show that she can not only talk a good game but can govern effectively in a high-pressure environment.

On the other hand, while being mayor of New York City comes with a large spotlight, the day-to-day details of governing — wooing neighborhood powerbrokers, ensuring essential services are delivered, bargaining with municipal unions over their next contracts, overseeing a police department accustomed to acting as a law unto itself — can be quite parochial and unlikely to impress future early state voters in South Carolina and New Hampshire. No modern New York City mayor (Lindsey, Koch, Giuliani, Bloomberg, De Blasio) who has sought higher office has succeeded. It's unlikely we'll see a Mayor AOC try to break the curse.

JAMAAL BOWMAN

Ocasio-Cortez's fellow Squad member Jamaal Bowman founded and led a Bronx middle school for 10 years. In 2020, he defeated a 16-term incumbent to win his congressional seat which encompasses parts of the Bronx and the suburbs north of the city.

Like AOC, Bowman as a mayoral candidate would also rack up progressive political endorsements and his association with the Squad would ensure a small-dollar fundraising haul. A happy warrior on the campaign trail, Bowman is capable of building a broad, citywide, multi-racial alliance. As a Black man from a similarly humble background as the mayor, he could derail Adams' strategy of framing voting against his re-election as an act of anti-Black racism. On the flip side, Bowman's proven ability to win votes in the city and the suburbs would make him a strong candidate to primary Gov. Kathy Hochul in 2026.

JUMAANE WILLIAMS

New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams has already won citywide office, assembling a coalition that spans both older Black voters and younger white progressives. He would have been the frontrunner to succeed Bill de Blasio if he had entered the 2021 mayoral race. Instead, he challenged Gov. Kathy Hochul from the left in the 2022 Democratic primary and lost by more than 40 points. Williams will be term-limited in 2025 and will be looking for a new job. But given that he wouldn't run for mayor when the position was his for the taking, it's hard to see him running for it as an underdog against his fellow Brooklyn Democrat.

BRAD LANDER

This affable Park Slope progressive upset Council Speaker Corey Johnson to win an open contest for city comptroller in 2021. As comptroller, he has wide powers to investigate the workings of the mayor's administration but hasn't been nearly as aggressive in going after the mayor as his predecessor Scott Stringer was with De Blasio. In the end, it's hard to see Lander wanting to spend months being denounced as racist for primarying Adams in 2025 when he can wait and try his luck in 2029.

STATE SENATOR JESSICA RAMOS

This former de Blasio aide rode the 2018 blue wave to an upset victory over a conservative Democratic incumbent in her Western Queens district. She then helped move the State Senate decisively to the left after decades of inertia. Ramos chairs the Senate Labor Committee and is close with many unions. She's an energetic fundraiser who has endorsed in local races across the city.

She has ambitions to move up, but to what? If AOC runs for higher office, Ramos would be a leading contender to claim her seat. Ramos could bide her time until 2029 when Adams would be term-limited.

However, Ramos refused to patiently wait "her turn" when she prevailed in 2018. If she jumped into the mayor's race against Adams in 2025, she could coalesce an alliance of progressives who have had enough of Adams' pro-1% policies as well as more identity-focused liberals who want to see New York City elect its first woman mayor. Ramos could also mobilize Latinx voters in a city where they are the second largest racial group but hold no citywide office. A factor that could deter Ramos is that unions almost always endorse incumbents. If that turns out to be the case with Adams, would she run for mayor against the wishes of some of her closest political allies?

RON KIM

Ron Kim may be the single most courageous state legislator in Albany. When most of his colleagues were still cowering in the shadow of King Cuomo, this Queens Assembly member denounced the governor for his role in sending COVID-19-infected hospital patients to nursing homes during the first wave of the pandemic. Cuomo's decision led to the death of as many as 15,000 elderly New Yorkers. In addition to hastening the downfall of a tyrannical governor, Kim has also wrangled with politically powerful forces in his own Chinese-American community who have subjected thousands of home healthcare attendants to years of abusive labor practices and rampant wage theft. Kim would be a worthy candidate for public advocate in 2025. But if there's a void to be filled in the mayoral race, this fearless public servant would stand in sharp contrast to an incumbent mayor who has catered to all the worst elements in New York City politics.

JABARI BRISPORT

The New York City chapter of the DSA has won seven state legislative seats and two spots on City Council since 2018 by targeting favorable districts it can swarm with volunteer canvassers. Running a mayoral candidate would be a radical departure. A DSA candidate would be heavily outspent and likely have a harder time coalescing the full gamut of progressive endorsements. The upside of diving into a David vs. Goliath mayoral contest is that, win or lose, a DSA candidate would be able to grab the spotlight that comes with a mayoral race and use it to spread their vision of a socialist New York.

All of DSA's electeds have served ably and well. Perhaps the one best suited to run against Adams is State Senator Jabari Brisport. A former public-school teacher like Chicago's Mayor-elect Brandon Johnson, Brisport is a gifted public speaker and a proven vote getter who defeated a machine-backed incumbent by 22 points to win his Brooklyn Senate seat in 2020. He defeated an Adams-backed primary challenger by 50 points in 2022. He would also be effective at defusing Adams' racial demagoguery and challenging the Mayor to defend his meager record.

BFM FRANCE

PORTUFRAISE VIA TWITTER

FRANCE IN REVO

PENSION CUT PROTESTS RAGE ON INTO THEIR FOURTH MONTH

By Sarah Turi

On April 6, a crowd of students, workers, retirees and union members packed the trains in the Paris Métro system, converging on Invalides, a monument near the National Assembly building on the left bank of the Seine. As they traversed the underground corridors, their voices united in a rallying cry: "Emmanuel Macron, oh tête de con, on vient te chercher chez toi." (Emmanuel Macron, oh dumbass, we're coming to your house to get you.") As the protesters reached the Invalides station, police officers greeted them at the doorways, randomly searching their belongings and bottlenecking the exit.

This demonstration and numerous others across France represented a crescendo of public dissent just a week before the April 14 Constitutional Council vote that approved President Emmanuel Macron's use of a constitutional provision to enact a bill to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 without a vote in the National Assembly.

"It's the first time I see Paris living so much since the lockdown in 2020. When you go in the streets, the only thing that doesn't work is traffic. The shops are still open. And the banks are completely shut down, of course, because people are burning the banks," Noemi Colin, a Parisian protester, told *The Indypendent*.

Millions of people had turned out for multiple protests against the pension bill since Macron's center-right government announced it Jan. 10. An alliance of the country's major labor unions called for strikes and demonstrations that began on Jan. 19, and protests took place from Amiens in the north to Bayonne in the southwest.

The bill will raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 by 2030. A January poll found more than 70% of respondents opposed it. It will also raise the time required to receive a full pension to 43 years of work. It will provide a minimum pension of 85% of the minimum wage, but only for those who meet very specific criteria — such as working in the private sector for their entire career without ever earning more than the minimum wage. This excludes many women, who often have gaps in their work history and on average receive pensions that are about 40% lower than men's.

"This amount is barely above the poverty line! No pension should be lower than the minimum wage for a complete career!" the leftist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union federation declared in January.

The leftist parties in the New Ecological and People's Social Union (NUPES), which includes La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, the largest), and the communist, socialist and green parties, also endorsed the unions' call for protests. Marine Le Pen of the far-right Rassemble National (National Rally) party, who came in second to Macron in the 2022 presidential elections, denounced the pension bill, but criticized the protests and strikes against it.

According to the CGT, 3.5 million people protested across France on March 7, while the Interior Ministry estimated 1.28 million. The demonstrations have been as large as those in 1995 against previous pension changes (won by protesters) and in 2010 against President Nicolas Sarkozy raising the retirement age from 60 to 62 (lost). Students are occupying buildings, workers are striking, and roadblocks and blockades have occurred nationwide, including piling trash in front of governmental buildings.

The movement's demands extend beyond keeping the retirement age at 62. The CGT wants the age returned to 60, with a minimum pension equal to the minimum wage (€2,000 per month, about US$2,225) instead of the government's proposed €1,200 and that time spent in school and other factors be considered as viable reasons for gaps in people's work history.

"There are more people than in the Yellow Vests protests, but the yellow vests of four or five years ago are now in the street against the reform too," said Lila, a vocal protester, referring to the Yellow Vest protests, a largely rural and outer-suburban movement sparked in 2018 when Macron raised taxes on gasoline and imposed other austerity measures.

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President Macron's decision on March 16 to invoke Article 49.3 of the French constitution — which enabled him to force the pension-reform legislation through without a vote in parliament — angered protesters further.

TWO VISIONS OF FRANCE'S FUTURE ARE CLASHING IN THE STREETS.

"For me it's not about the pension reform any more. It's about the system of governance. Macron's use of Article 49.3 for the eleventh time in his reign to bypass parliament feels like we are in a monarchy," Jean-Baptiste Yasak told *The Guardian*.

The demonstrators range in age from young high-school students, through workers in their prime, to retirees.

"The young generation isn't used to demonstrating. Now, it's coming back," says Noemi Colin. "Young people are massively in the street and it's so joyful — dancing and listening to music and singing demonstration songs."

"When we have exhausted legal avenues, there is only mobilization in the streets left — whether it is demonstrations, riots or things like that," a young protester named Nathan told *The Indy*.

At demonstrations, youth run around spray-painting walls and roads, scaling bus stands, trees and lampposts. Flaming trash cans light up the processions, with protesters navigating around the occasional mound of burning trash and debris. Meanwhile, people watching from their windows demonstrate their support — and occasionally opposition — eliciting cheers of solidarity or boos.

Other protesters carry whimsical sculptures, such as a Tim Burton-esque papier-mâché sculpture of Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne surrounded by signs reading, "Let's throw Macron's world in the trash," "French democracy 1789-2023 defeated by Article 49.3" and "Retirement before arthritis." At the April 13 Paris protest, a Pink Bloc cortege featured a van that read *Amour, Greve & Blockage* — Love, Strike and Blockade. Another slogan referred to a popular brand of beer: "16-64: It's My Beer, Not My Career."

The April 14 decision by the Constitutional Council, a high court that reviews the constitutionality of legislation, re-energized the mobilizations.

Despite President Macron's unwavering position, "there will be no return to normal unless the reform is withdrawn" exclaimed Sophie Binet, a prominent union leader, on April 20. That day, hundreds of demonstrators in Lorient, a seaport in Brittany, lit fires to block all traffic. They kept the blaze alive throughout the morning.

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As the group I was with reached Place de la Bastille during protests on April 13, the police suddenly materialized, tears streaming down people's faces as pepper spray assaulted our eyes.

"We were massively gassed by cops who threw grenades from behind," said my friend Emma, recounting a terrifying moment when she realized that she and her friends were hemmed in by the cops, trapped between police barricades.

On March 31, a group of lawyers submitted around 100 complaints denouncing the arbitrary arrests that have taken place since the implementation of Article 49.3. French law gives the police significant authority to arrest people who insult them. But most arrests during this movement have resulted in no legal action. After a March 16 protest at Place de la Concorde in Paris, for example, only nine out of 292 detained demonstrators faced criminal proceedings, suggesting purpose of the arrests was to suppress public dissent, not to catch those who damaged property.

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The January call for a strike was the first by the eight major French unions in 12 years, when President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed raising the retirement age to 62. Since 1970, the unionization rate amongst French workers has seen a significant decline, but throughout this movement, unions have witnessed a surge in membership.

On March 6, garbage collectors and sewer workers in Paris began occupying and blocking the city's incinerators, with 20–30% of these workers going on strike. In mid-March, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin requisitioned waste-management workers to return to the job, putting them at risk of six months in prison and tens of thousands of euros in fines if they continued to strike. French journalists reported that these employees of the state nonetheless continued to protest by slowing their work pace. And, outraged protesters took to social-media platforms and messaging apps, forming group chats mobilizing blockades at waste-management facilities throughout France for over a month.

On March 7, more than one third of workers went on strike in France's gas and electricity sector, at its government-owned railroad company and in education.

On March 11, amidst nationwide strikes, four out of seven oil refineries in France shut down. By March 22, at a Total refinery in Normandy, the state started requisitioning workers to ship kerosene to airports. In response, over 300 workers and students assembled in front of the refinery and staged an all-night vigil to prevent requisitioned workers from entering the site. A court suspended those requisitions on April 6, calling them "a serious and manifestly illegal infringement of the right to strike."

"The strike of the refiners, like that of the garbage collectors, allows linking the issue of pensions, wages and environmental issues and can have a decisive impact on the protests against the reform and the government," Laura Menge, a labor lawyer and activist at Revolution Permanente, a Trotskyist political party, told *The Indy*.

After three months of power cuts across France, known as the Robin Hood operations, the National Federation of Mines and Energy Trade Unions warned that upcoming high-profile events like the Cannes Film Festival, the Monaco Grand Prix, the French Open tennis tournament and the Avignon theater festival might be affected.

"In May, do as you please," the union said in an April 21 press release. "We won't give up!" It also emphasized that striking employees would closely monitor "all branch negotiations, whatever the subject," to achieve not just the withdrawal of the pension changes but also the fulfillment of their other demands.

The strikes and blockades have caused significant disruptions to France's energy sector and economy. Electricité de France, the country's primary utility, has lost a staggering €1 billion worth of output as a result of strikes at nuclear and hydropower plants. Meanwhile, disruptions at liquefied natural gas terminals led to a decrease of 1.1 million tons in gas imports between February and March, costing an additional €650 million.

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Another notable visual of the protests has been the shattered glass advertisement stands lining the streets, often bearing the word "reform" spray-painted above jagged, fractured openings.

Why does the pension bill foment such extreme and enduring anger? It reflects the broader neoliberal trend in France that prioritizes market efficiency over social protections and workers' rights. This has been spearheaded by center-right President Macron, who has gone to lengths to associate himself with former U.S. President Barack Obama.

Like earlier measures to make it easier for employers to lay workers off, the bill represents a push to make France more "competitive" in the global economy at the expense of workers' economic security and leisure time.

"In France, we say that we're fighting not to end up like in the United States. We want to defend our rights; we want to defend our gains," said a hospital worker at an April 1 protest in Paris.

Many fear that Macron will continue to implement austerity measures that fracture France's expansive social-welfare state. All French workers, citizens and legal residents are covered by health insurance, occupational accident and illness insurance, retirement insurance (pensions) and unemployment insurance, and family allowances are paid upon the birth of a child, as well as allowances for early child care, education and accommodation.

Inequality still exists in France, though. According to a 2018 report by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, life expectancy for the poorest 5% of men is 13 years shorter than it is for the wealthiest 5%. Protests say raising the retirement age will only make this worse, particularly for women and France's predominantly African and Middle-Eastern immigrants.

"At the age of 64, a quarter of the poorest French people —workers — are already dead. So we don't want to work until we die. It doesn't interest us," said Delphine, a railway worker, on April 6.

IN THE STREETS: *Tens of thousands of Parisians march against pension cuts on March 11. The protests have continued into May.*

BLAZE: *The aftermath of a fiery night of protest in Paris.*

"It's part of France's DNA, the revolution," she continued. "But it's also because we have this great social system. You know, in the United States, it's better not to get sick. But in France, if you get sick, you get treated. There's no problem. You find a doctor, and you go to the hospital. And we think it should be like that all the time. And above all, we don't want to lose that, because we know there is a way to finance all of this. We pay taxes, no problem."

Protest is ingrained in French society. From the 1789 revolution that overthrew (and beheaded) the king and a centuries-old hereditary aristocracy, to subsequent revolutions in 1830, 1848 and 1871 that sent autocrats fleeing, to the student-worker uprising of May 1968, the French generally demonstrate and strike en masse when their rights are at risk. (In the colonial era, France also controlled the second largest global empire after the British, which few native-born French questioned.)

Since April, France has seen an outpouring of Casserolades — public cacophonies created by banging on metal household utensils, a practice used to denounce the monarchy in 1832.

"We still go to work. In the afternoon, we take three or four hours to demonstrate. At both my school and at my job, which are two very different places, many, many people are going to the streets during the demonstrations, and people are very easy to convince to go," Noemi Colin said.

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The Constitutional Council's April 14 ruling in support of Macron's pension bill triggered another tumultuous round of protests across the country. Demonstrators rallied around city halls and key government buildings, torching garbage bins and setting the streets ablaze. In Rennes, protestors set fire to an empty police station using garbage cans.

The number of protest fires has been unlike anything I have ever seen. Burnt remnants of sidewalk railings, road signs, lamp posts and trash cans now blend into the city's fabric, their presence a powerful reminder of the movement's resilience.

Now that the bill is law, there are no impending decisions for protesters to try to sway, so they hope to disrupt society enough that the government has no choice but to give in to their demands and reverse those decisions.

"Demonstrations are really a symbol of how the French people can express themselves," Laura, an ecologist, said at the April 6 protest in Paris, speaking about the current state of democracy. "It's really about taking back power, and it's possible to make a revolution."

While the size of the protests and strikes has somewhat dwindled over the last three months, large actions again took place April 28–29. On May 1, all eight major trade unions united for the first time since 2009 for massive International Workers Day demonstrations ten times larger than last year's. The CGT reported 2.3 million protesters; the Ministry of Interior, 782,000. With 12,000 police officers deployed across France, the day saw intense repression from law enforcement and ended in 540 arrests.

THE FUN, ACCESSIBLE INTRO TO SOCIALISM WE'VE NEEDED

Socialism…Seriously: A Brief Guide to Surviving the 21st Century
By Danny Katch
Haymarket Books, 2023

By John Tarleton

On Feb. 5, a two-mile long train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. It was owned by Norfolk Southern, one of big four rail companies in the United States that combined to make $78.4 billion profits last year.

A massive explosion that followed the derailment blanketed East Palestine in the hazardous chemicals that were being carried on the train. The same toxic chemicals entered local tributaries that feed into the Ohio River, which supplies drinking water to millions of people who live downstream. After being painfully slow to acknowledge the tragedy and quick to point fingers at each other when they did, Republicans and Democrats in Congress eventually began making noises about forcing the railroads to update the braking technologies used on trains, which date back to the 1860s. This would barely dent their profits, but they have lobbied the past three presidential administrations to be spared the expense.

The railroads' lack of concern for public safety has been matched only by their drive to price gouge shippers and exploit their workers, who are denied sick days and are required to be on call to work 90% of the time.

Similarly rapacious behavior can be seen across industries, from airlines that deliberately overbook their flights and leave travelers stranded, to pharmaceutical companies that bankrupt sick people with soaring prices on life-saving medicines, to energy companies that continue heating up the planet because it's more profitable to burn fossil fuels than to make a transition to renewable energy sources. Meanwhile, the super rich don't want to pay taxes so our threadbare social safety net barely functions.

It's a great set-up for CEOs and wealthy investors (and the politicians they buy off). But isn't there a better way to run a society than to allow a small group of greedy sociopaths to maximize their profits at everyone else's expense?

Danny Katch certainly thinks so. In 2014, he published the first edition of *Socialism…Seriously*. At the time, he was trying to explain an ideology and a way of doing politics that seemed hopelessly antiquated to most observers. Much has changed since as support for socialism (however nebulously defined) has surged in the past decade.

Bernie Sanders' two presidential campaigns revived a dormant left in the United States and brought the "S" word back into mainstream politics for the first time in decades. The rise of the Squad in Congress and the election of scores of socialists to state and local office — many of them young people of color — demonstrated socialism's broader appeal, especially to a younger generation. The surge in union organizing since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has ignited hopes of a labor revival that could anchor a rising socialist movement.

In the second edition of his book (which boasts on its cover of having "50% more socialism"), Katch offers a primer in the socialist critique of capitalism, its theories of how to overthrow capitalism and its vision of what a world beyond capitalism could look like. And while Katch is as serious as the next socialist about changing the world, his writing is filled with a humorist's wisecracks and light-hearted asides that make the book a pleasure to read and model a generosity of spirit that we could use more of on the left.

To bring to life an ideal that has never been fully realized anywhere, Katch begins and ends his book with a couple of postcards from a democratic socialist future. They are set in the Year 2040. In the first, we follow a day in the life of a young coffee-shop worker who is having a lousy day in their own personal life — no social system can resolve all the challenges of being human — but, as their day unfolds, you gradually realize all the ways they are free from the routine injustices of capitalism. Even a bad day under socialism, Katch cleverly argues, would still be better than a good day under capitalism.

At the end of *Socialism…Seriously*, we meet the same character on a sweltering summer day made worse by climate change. In a socialist future, who qualifies for air conditioning exemptions? And why did his mother have to die of COVID-27? Even a world free of capitalist exploitation and all the cops, prisons, slumlords, insurance claims adjusters, etc. that come with it won't be an easy one to live in. Not after all the damage we have done to the Earth. But with his humorous dissecting of the inanities of capitalism and his ability to make socialist ideas accessible and attractive, Katch makes a compelling case throughout his book for why we should still do everything we can to bring such a world into existence.

GARY MARTIN

TRADER JOE'S UNION

Continued from page 6

ity that has defined organized labor in America since its decline in the 1980s.

Regarding the difference in support between the independent and traditional approach, financial and otherwise, Medrano said, "A lot of my coworkers are just so happy at the idea that this is our own thing and we determine how it functions."

• • •

"There was just complete censorship of union literature," says Pollack. "It would be at least five times a day, a cat and mouse game of putting up union information on a bulletin board and having it taken down."

According to Essex Crossing crew members who spoke to *The Indypendent*, management also held anti-union huddles daily ahead of the April 20 election and spread rumors about what would happen if the store were unionized — all common union-busting practices. The unique aspect of Trader Joe's tactics at Essex Crossing was that they did their best to maximize union-busting out of the workers that were already there on-the-ground.

"Trader Joe's is learning. The first store in Minneapolis, they had regional managers and higher ups come in and talk to people. In Kentucky, they just had regional managers and managers do it. At our store, they had crewmembers and mates do it. So I think they're learning that if you put it on the people that everyone works with instead of a corporate face, the result is you can probably get people to back out of the union," Medrano told The Indy after the election.

TJU Lawyer Seth Goldstein thinks that the scrappy organizing team should be proud of the tied result. "Organizing isn't supposed to be easy," he says. "The labor movement is hard. It's hard work."

NOBODY DOES IT ON THEIR OWN

Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream
By Alissa Quart
Ecco, March 2023

By Renée Feltz

TYRONE WALLACE

In *Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream*, Alissa Quart, head of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, lays bare the myth of self-sufficiency in a way that really does feel liberating. Rich with wit, her storytelling mixes historic and contemporary references and carries on her former friend and colleague Barbara Ehrenreich's searing analysis of ways the rich exploit the poor.

Her first chapter opens with a quote from the former-slave-turned abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass and his popular "Self-Made Men" address.

"There are in the world no such men as self-made men. The term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist."

And yet, he is often misquoted — by those who cite Ayn Rand and Horatio Alger — to promote the idea that we should attribute our ability to "climb the ladder" to skill and dedication, without acknowledging the role of generational wealth and where it comes from. Quart sets the record straight and notes along the way that Alger was an alleged pedophile and that Ayn Rand relied on Social Security in her later years.

Quart also describes how, when it was first used, the notion of bootstrapping ourselves to success was mocked: "When the concept of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps was first advanced in 1834 it was understood as surreal, intended to be seen as an outlandish act — how could anyone pull up their boots to lift their own bodies?" But by the time of President Reagan, she notes that "to be a self-made success meant you were morally good, and if you had failed to succeed, you were morally corrupt."

The burden of the American Dream can now be found in the common experiences of Americans and the "dystopian safety net" we have come to rely on, such as creating a GoFundMe to cover our healthcare costs or working for gig companies that exploit "the allure of individualism" and define their workers as "independent contractors." In one chapter, "The Con of the Side Hustle," Quart writes about Vanessa Bain, who was a personal shopper before the pandemic, but came to feel she was not being treated fairly once it started — the money and flexible hours did not make up for the lack of healthcare while being exposed to a deadly virus as an "essential worker."

In the final part of her book, Quart looks at how to preserve the social safety net, and keep the parts that were expanded during the pandemic, and how mutual aid is actually also linked to the naturalist Charles Darwin. Her chapter on "Inequality Therapy" examines how "the cult of individualism has led generations to lacerate themselves." She describes how some have called for reducing reliance on terms like "resilience" or "grit" and embracing a trauma-informed approach.

It would be great if lawmakers and policymakers would embrace the concept of interdependence in their language and in the laws they pass. In the meantime, a more informed public can refuse to go along with the sham.

"In order to get to this more radiantly centered place, though, we each need to work to snuff out the self-made myth within ourselves and to stop flagellating ourselves when we don't achieve autonomous glory," Quart writes. "Needing each other is our strength, not our weakness. Singular triumphs never existed in the first place."

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COVID & OUR 'MANUFACTURED AMNESIA'

The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality & Disease Collide
By Steven Thrasher
Celadon Books, August 2022

By John Tarleton

President Joe Biden originally planned to end the COVID-19 national emergency on May 11. However, he couldn't wait. On April 10, behind closed doors, he signed a bipartisan congressional resolution ending the national emergency declared three years earlier at the onset of COVID. The declaration had empowered the federal government to take extraordinary actions to protect people's health and economic security during a pandemic that has killed more than 1 million Americans.

For historian Steven Thrasher, Biden's haste embodies the political class's desire to divest itself of any responsibility for a virus that still claims hundreds of lives per day and to erase from public memory what the federal government can do for people's lives when it cares enough to act. He is the author of *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide*.

THE INDYPENDENT: What do you think is being lost amid all this socially-induced amnesia?

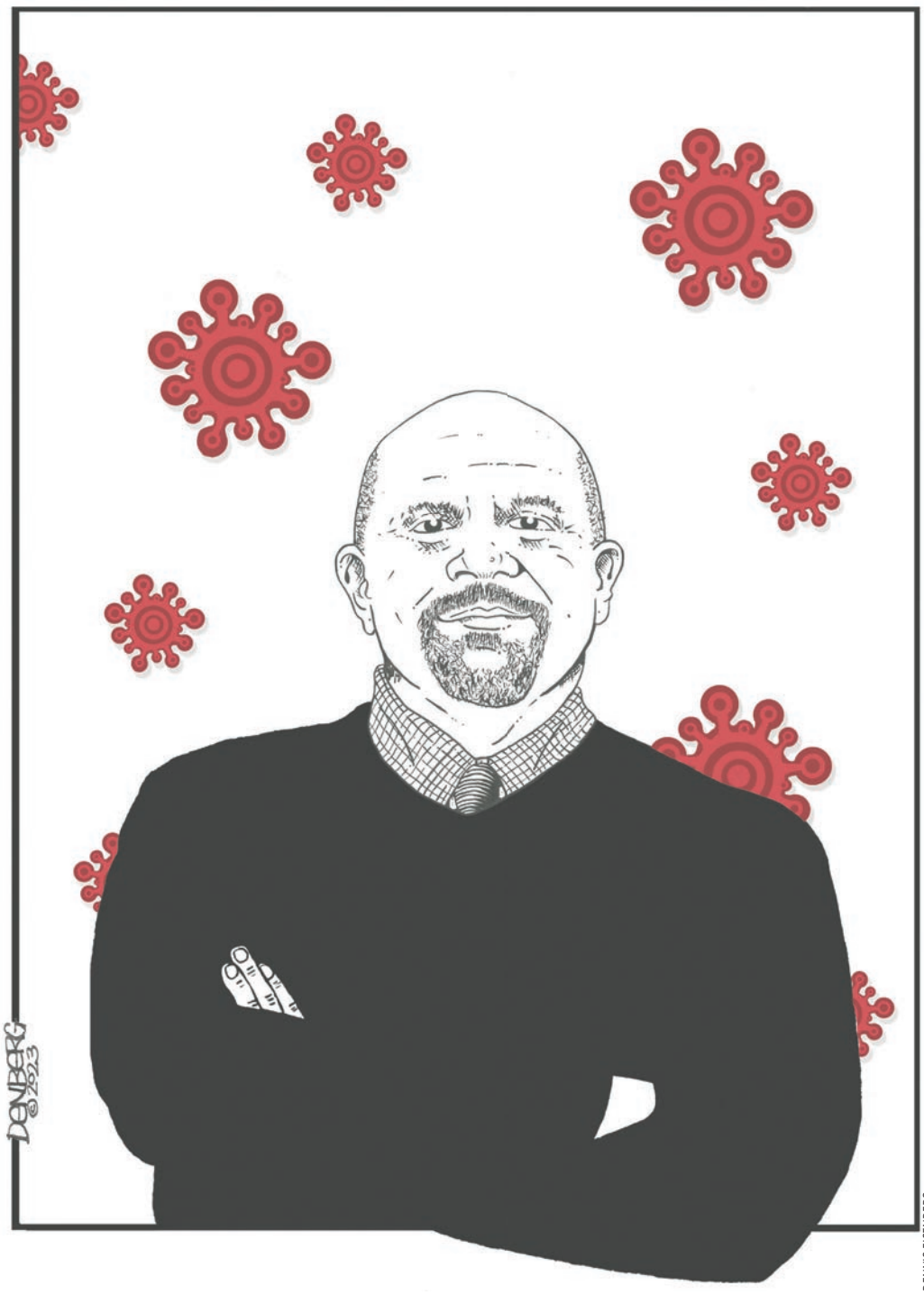
STEVEN THRASHER: The most important thing being lost is lives. *The New York Times* and Johns Hopkins University had the most comprehensive national accounts but have stopped counting for at least a month. But the last time there were national numbers published by Johns Hopkins, it was still almost 300 people a day, a little more than 2,000 a week or close to 10,000 a month.

Politically, from a left perspective, the other thing that was lost, that hurts people — but I think it also hurts the Democrats electorally — is that they had the opportunity to increase the floor going forward. They passed the $300 per month child tax credit that cut childhood poverty almost in half and they let it expire after one year, even though conservative parents also like having $300 per child in their hands. They also expanded Medicaid rolls by 15 million people during the emergency. Now those people are being kicked off.

How did we get to this place?

I feel nostalgic for the summer of 2020. In New York City, we had gone from like 800 deaths per day to like 10 and everyone had a very precious sense of the sanctity of life. A lot of us spent that summer in parks in the evenings where we could safely be with our friends and were really thinking consciously about how much we valued connection to one another. I could leave my house and run into a Black Lives Matter bike protest without even looking for one. We could create something better than the old "normal" seemed within reach. And now, there's just been a vicious, relentless move to recreate not only normal, as horrible as it was, but something that's post-normal, because there are a million more dead people. It feels more draconian on a lot of fronts, because there's just this willfully manufactured amnesia and almost a sadistic-seeming desire to refuse to learn any lessons from what's happened in order to create a better future.

The idea of responding to the pandemic with collective care has been supplanted to a significant extent by a conservative counternarrative that seeks not only to discredit basic public-health practices as being tyrannical but to discredit the very idea that people have basic obligations to each other, even in a national emergency.



DENNIS EISENBERG

This right-wing narrative is having a powerful revisionist effect on what the collective memory is remembering of what happened. Personally, I could never blame anyone for trying anything that was too drastic, given a million people died in the United States alone. As a historian of AIDS, I often talk about how it took the United States 40 years to get to the 700,000 deaths from that pandemic. It's had such an enormous impact on my gay community and on people who are incarcerated and hemophiliacs and families that deal with addiction. There's been so much death and mourning over 40 years. The U.S. went through that in 20 months to get to that level of death. To me, there could be no overreaction in trying to stop that level of death.

The Democrats have let this go so much, and many more people have died under Joe Biden than Trump who didn't have the vaccine, while Biden does. That's not to say the vaccines don't work. The problem, as we saw with AIDS, is that capitalism keeps people from getting the medications they need.

Wait a minute. How much of the higher COVID death toll under Biden is due to people, many of them Trump supporters, who refused to wear masks or to be vaccinated?

Not a huge amount. I think the government should have kept working with this population. When you allow the virus to just keep bouncing and bouncing and bouncing and bouncing, without any mitigation strategy to stop it from first moving, it's going to kill lots and lots of people. And that's exactly what's happening.

The vaccine is one part of the strategy, but we're asking it to do too much work. I keep coming back to AIDS, because that's what I know most. Once there were medications to treat HIV, doctors didn't stop using gloves. We didn't stop wearing condoms, or taking other HIV mitigation strategies. The medications were one and, ideally, the last line of defense.

Do you see the rapid unraveling of the government response to COVID being due in part to a fear that it posed an ideological threat to the idea that "big government" is bad and can never be trusted as an instrument for solving collective challenges?

I very much believe that. Both the Democrats and Republicans have other priorities. They will always find money for war. They'll always find money for police. A lot of localities were given federal money with few strings attached. And rather than spend it on a collective good such as revamping every air system in every public school, they instead were encouraged by the Biden administration to spend that money on police. In Chicago, where I live, we had 38% of the city budget going to the police. Then, Mayor Lori Lightfoot took federal COVID money that was earmarked for the Chicago public schools and sent it to the police.

And now the economic burden of the pandemic is being shifted almost entirely onto people with the ending of the public-health emergency. That's an embrace of the same kind of neoliberalism that got us into this process.

Is there a deeper lesson we can learn from our encounter with this virus?

I write a chapter in my book about speciesism and how we can learn lessons from viruses that show us that we are sharing one collective body, whether we like it or not. This is something gay men have understood for decades. Our risk of HIV is not just about me and the person I'm having sex with. There's this virus moving through the community. So you have a responsibility to other people, because the virus is just trying to replicate in as many bodies as it can. So you can't just think about yourself, but, "how do I get the rate down for our entire body?" which will ultimately be better for me. If we can learn this lesson about our interconnectedness to each other and to the rest of the living world, it would serve us well in trying to deal with other challenges such as climate change.

REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Reverend Billy,
You talk a lot about the climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction. But you always call for non-violent protest. If things keep getting worse, shouldn't we be ready to stop this madness by any means necessary?

— LEWIS

Well, yes, the violence by Chase, Blackrock, Citigroup, Exxon, Shell — they have made the dark decision. Killing the planet's life systems is their big profit center. But don't be tempted to play into their hands. They have the police and courts set up for our protests to be vilified in the manner of rape victims. Manuel Estaebon Paez Teran (aka "Tortuguita"), shot in their tent defending the Welaunee Forest from being cut down to build Cop City. Anthony Lowe Jr., the double amputee, shot while trying to escape on his stumps. Christian Glass, shot by police while parked in his car.

Shootings of all kinds have expanded in parallel to climate violence. Knocking on a neighbor's door is becoming deadly at the same time as the climate crisis invents new nightmares like the atmospheric rivers in California — deadly waterfalls coming straight down from jet streams.

It is not the time to protest in their gun sights. And yet, as actual living becomes impossible, the virtual life of the screen cooks our dopamines. The other side of their strategy, less clear to us, is that they are converting actual living into virtual living.

They are managing the general psyche of the public as never before. A gigantic simulation is growing around our eyes. All of life is becoming a kind of porn. So where does this leave the social change that absolutely must happen for equality, justice and the turnaround of the Earth's crisis?

We must GO OUTSIDE! They don't want us to reenter public space for some of our random, rhythmic full-body storytelling. When we become predictable in our rallies and marches and occupations, then we are vulnerable to their guns, their defamation, i.e. public-safety-as-trauma. We are safest and more effective as resistance to this madness when we are creating original culture. They won't be able to aim their guns or aim their screens.

The answer comes to us in the explanation of medieval carnival by Mikhail Bakhtin. He says that the opening ritual of the carnival was to depose the King, replace him with a Fool and then depose the Fool as the party devolves into unchecked mayhem.

A fanfuckingtastic modern and political carnival took place over Earth Day weekend in London. Two hundred ecology-centric organizations responded to the invitation by Extinction Rebellion (XR) to lay siege to the fossil-fuel politicians in their Westminster offices. As Big Ben loomed above, a carnival of greenies — 60,000 of us — from Greenpeace to your local recycling group began a mile-wide circle dance.

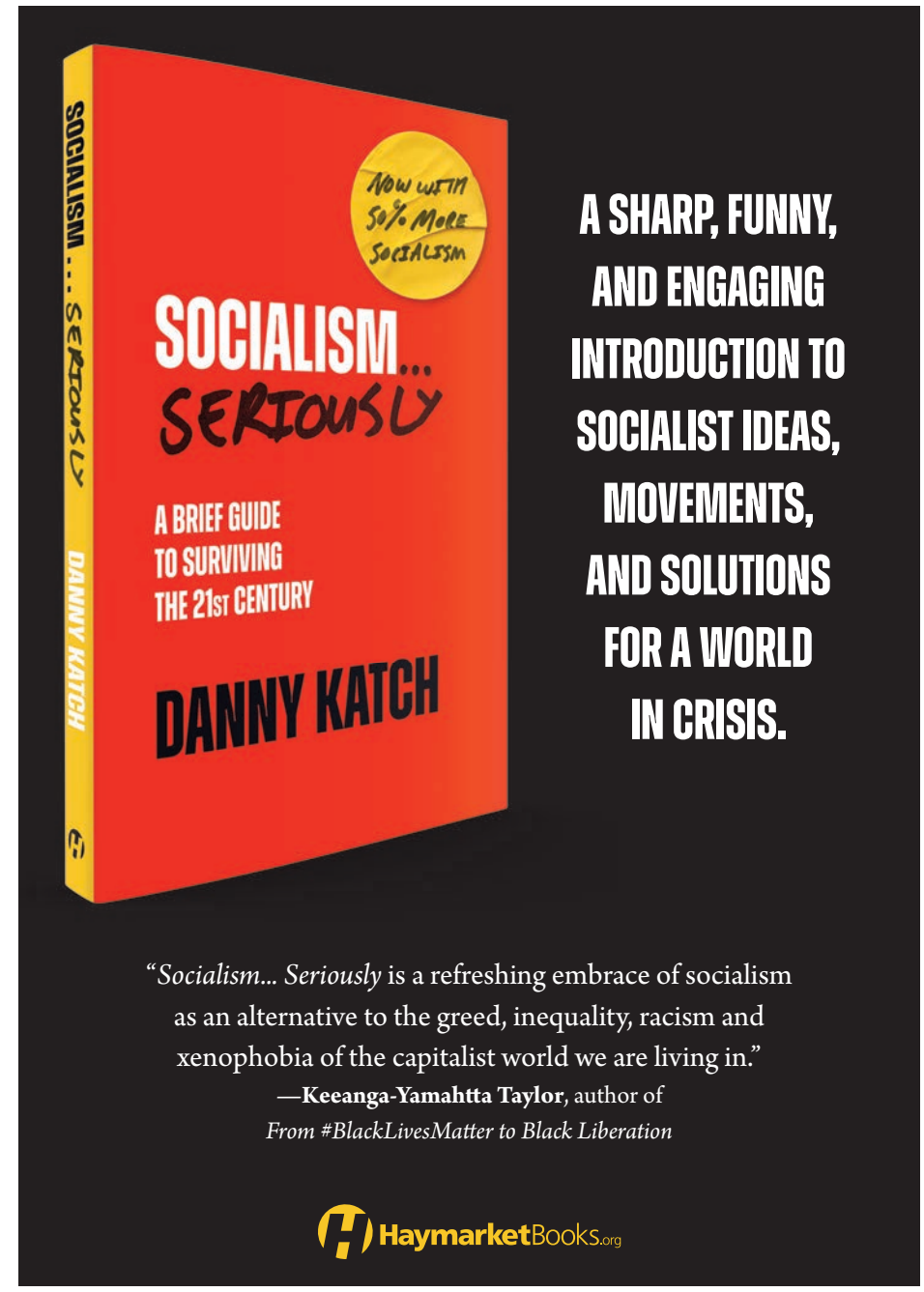
It took the form of a constellation of drumming chanting rallies. Each group had its own spot, but within range of the others. The main stage was there, but there were portable stages called rickshaws and parades and dancing and music. Music, and more music. Whole lotta shakin' goin' on.

In the UK the bobbies don't have guns. But you could see that the police were disoriented by the strange arrangement of partying, workshops, drum-circles. The XR leadership was laughing a lot. I was asked to give a blessing, and while walking to the stage, going through my script in my head, a co-founder of XR Gail Bradbrook stopped me and began rubbing soma mushroom oil into my arms while delivering a laughing lecture about witches making love to their broomsticks... that's how they flew, you see... and that's how my blessing flew...

The demand by the 200 groups of the government, the setting up of a special Earth-sensitive National Assembly, was not met. The new prime minister is, after all, a billionaire investment banker from Goldman Sachs. The vision of a democracy for the Earth was created, shared, and planning has begun.

The King and other Fools with crowns were marched to the Tower of London but the doors were left ajar.

REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.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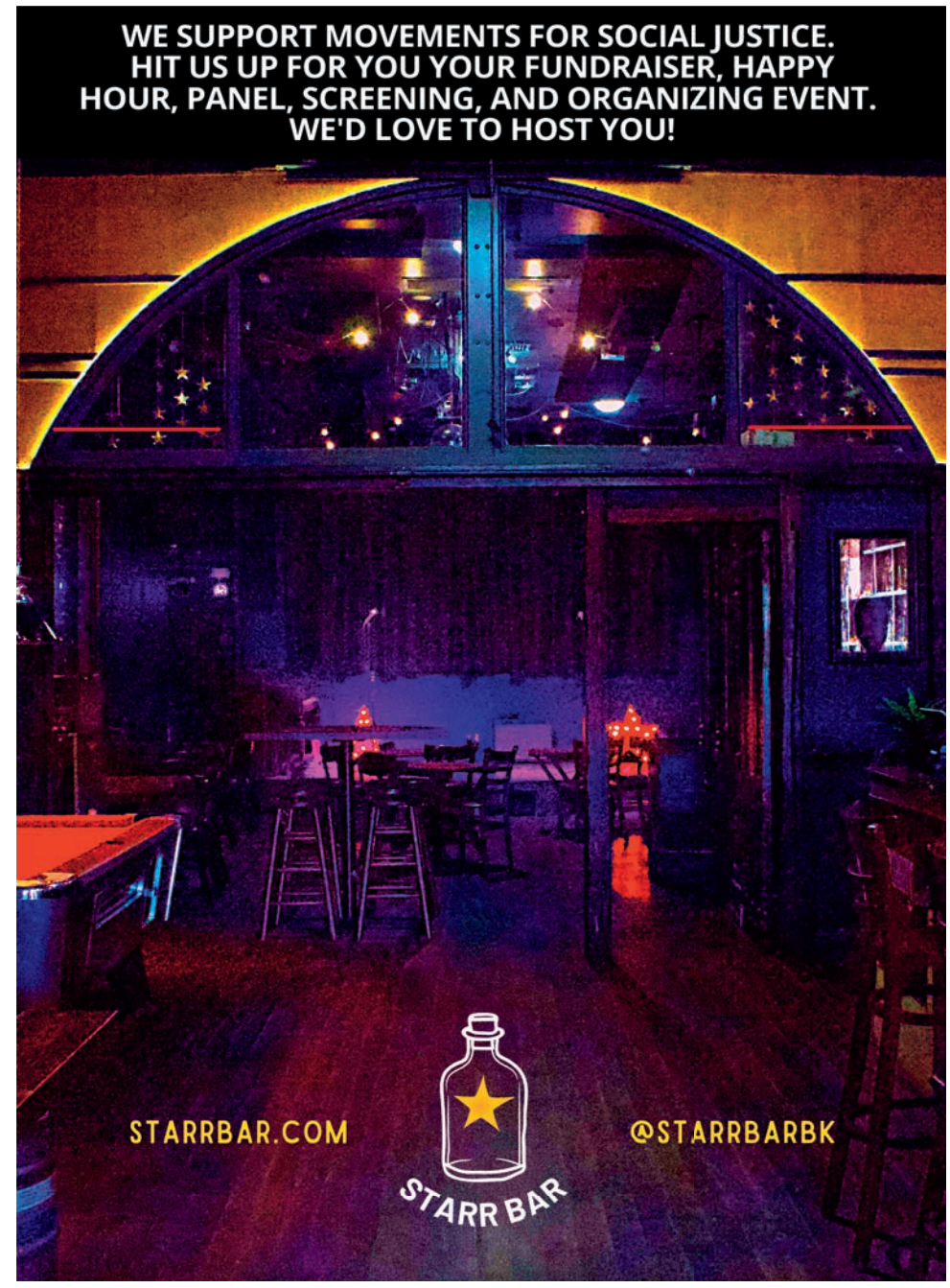
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